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PLANET

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THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS

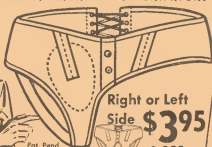
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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, NO. 7

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

JULY, 1952

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Bryce Carter could well afford a smug smile. Hadn't he risen gloriously from Thieves Row to director of famed U. T.? Was not Earth, Maan, and all the Belt, at this very moment awaiting his sweeping command for the grand coup? And wasn't his wondrous cousin-from-Montehedo a star-sent help?

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Missives, merry and maudlin, from our readers.

T. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

This is one robot that thrives on rhubarb. Be it red or brown, pink or beige, we love it. For it's the stuff that makes good letter columns. One Hapke missive, for example, can cook up the most delicious rhubarb this side of home plate. Rich enough, too, to last for months. Sprinkle with bouquets, smother with brickbats, and you've got a dish worthy of the ish.

But let's get at these pic winners before the Oracle speaks. Edwin Corley, Helen Huber and Mavis Hartman, in the order named.

SPEAK, O ORACLE!

Box 1329, Grand Central Station
New York 17, New York

Dear Editor,

I've been a rather avid reader of PLANET STORIES for quite a number of years. For that matter, I've read every issue that you've ever put on the newsstands, right on down from Volume One, Number One.

During this time I've watched your magazine present various forms of sci-fictional material in varied ways, both original and typical, both excellent and poor in quality. I've seen many better magazines, but even more that are worse. I like PLANET STORIES because it presents to me an escapist form of literature which proves useful in helping to pass the time of day.

It seems to me, and probably it is evident to the editorial staff, that several people whose letters appear quite regularly in the VIZIGRAPH feel that PLANET isn't worth the paper it's printed on. This class of fen say the same things in their letters issue after issue. They seem to feel that reading the best and "only regular" space-opera publication is a waste of time, and continue to send in blasting opinions of "bad-old PLANET STORIES." If they feel that PLANET is so bad, why the dickens do they continue to read it? The answer is self-evident. They like the magazine, or they wouldn't invest the quarter necessary to purchase it every two months. In order to attract attention, and have the satisfaction of showing friends their names in print as critics, these egoists and egotists waste the editors' time, and fond readers' money by cramming up space which could otherwise be used for constructive criticism.

A professional editor has much more to contend with than a few reader-gripes. He has to produce a magazine, and also sell it to the public! I happen to be a science-fiction fan, and like other fen, would like to see several changes take place in PLANET STORIES. The editorial staff also would undoubtedly like to see a few changes, but publisher's policy often makes changes impossible.

Fandom represents but a small percentage of the total readers of any science-fiction pulp, and the majority of readers of these pulps probably would not be interested in a magazine prepared for the whims and desires of fen alone. Through the VIZIGRAPH and similar services in other magazines, editors are giving us some-

thing that is of no value to the average reader class. That something is a "voice." Let us take advantage of this voice and not be greedy. After all, the general aim of any magazine is to make money!

Another thing, sexy covers help to sell a magazine. For that matter, the first issue of PLANET that I bought appealed to be because of the cover. Some fan appear to mean it when they say they are ashamed to be seen with a publication having such a cover. Why should they be? If you like something enough to read it, the thoughts and comments of others should not hurt you. If you are questioned or challenged by others as to the reason you read such literature, you can always suggest to the ignorant that they try reading the magazine before hurling unfounded opinions at you. After all, a matter cannot be logically argued without a knowledge of the subject under discussion.

In my humble opinion two stories tied for first place in your March 1952 issue. They were: THE AMBASSADORS FROM VENUS by Kendell Foster Crossen, and RETURN OF A LEGEND by Raymond Z. Gallun. Either story might have been written by Ray Bradbury. The endings were certainly unexpected and exciting. Although the material presented in the above stories was off-trail for PLANET, it certainly should be recognized as a calibre of writing seldom before equaled in PLANET's history.

CAPTIVE OF THE CENTAURIANESS by Poul Anderson takes third place because of its unusual wit and its unusual presentation of sex. I take it that Anderson has a non-exact style since his writing differs greatly in practically every story I've read of his. Is this true or does PLANET possess a house name that has gone unknown thus far?

RICOCHET ON MIZA by Gordon R. Dickson, and IS THAT YOU, XELUCHLI by Dick Hetschel tied for fourth. Both stories sounded like first draft hackings of a famous pulp writer who sells 175,000 words per month. They were interesting in their own little ways; but lack of plot puts them both in second division.

One story in your magazine simply doesn't make sense. I'm putting it in sixth place. I'm speaking of Gardner F. Fox's TONIGHT THE STARS REVOLT.

I enjoyed all the illustrations except the one on page thirty-one. It was blah! Special citations go to the cover illustration, and the one on page sixty-four and five.

The VIZIGRAPH was good as usual. The winner should be Bruce Hapke for the most interesting letter I've seen in any magazine in years. Wild William, who-ever-the-devil he is, gets second for the most illogical, if not crazy letter of the issue; and third place goes to Irving M. Schein for a surprise ending.

Fanatically yours,

MR. U

Ed's note: What can I say after U have said it all?

SPACE OPERA YET?

1808 So. Penn. St.,
Denver 10, Colo.

Dear Mr. Robot,

For some reason or other I have always considered PLANET a science-fiction mag, but after reading (well, scanning) Poul Anderson's little nothing, SWORDSMAN OF LOST TERRA, I fear I must alter my opinion. That little masterpiece of dribble was no more science-fiction than THE ADVENTURES OF AB. Please, ed, please, don't lower your high standards by including such claptrap in dear old PLANET.

And, while I'm griping, I may as well air my views on your art work, especially Vestal's illo of INCUBI OF PARALLEL X. Never have I seen legs like that on any human, man or woman. Gad, man, are you drawing from memory? If not, I advise finding a new model, pronto.

Incidentally, the story was n. g. Lionel Meltzer, I love you! I, too, would like to read a riproaring space-opera wherein the hero is yclept Sam, not Melp or Wocka.

C'est tout,

JUDY FARNSWORTH

Ed's note: New model just legged it off the assembly line. Gad, woman, lookout!

JUST PLAIN FOLK

704 North Spadra Road,
Fullerton, California

Dear Editor,

I would like to answer Bruce Hapke's letter in the March issue of your magazine. He thinks that the race is improving, but I'd like to put a question mark on that statement. I believe that human nature changes, but can we be truthful in saying that it's changing for the better?

He brought up the idea that our religions are improving. He believes that the change in the concept of God is good, but I'm afraid I must disagree. The morals of a people are affected by their concept of God. Therefore, the stricter they believe God to be, the stricter their morals will be. The old concept of God may have been too strict, but the new concept is too lenient. The popular belief that there is no Hell certainly doesn't help the morals of those who agree with this belief.

If everyone is naturally going to Heaven, there is nothing to strive for. And a healthy people must have something to strive for. We must realize too, that this trend toward the acceptance of an easy religion shows that modern people want to take the easy way out. For evidence of this fact, listen to the complaints about taxes and the desires for more benefits. Is this progress? If it is, I'm for going backwards.

However, I must say that we have improved in some aspects. Mr. Hapke brought that out. Yet, we aren't essentially any better. We've shed some of our faults and have picked up some other faults. Honestly, I like our time and age, but let's not fool ourselves into thinking we've made any enormous strides.

Sincerely,

NEAL CLARK REYNOLDS

1118 Boynton Avenue
New York 72, New York

Dear Editor,

I've suffered long enough. I've been a passive fan for too long.

I don't like letters from twelve year olds who have just been taught to read.

I don't like letters from grandmothers who have read your magazine for the first time, and who find Fred Brown darling and cute.

I don't like letters from professional "fens" who speak in a strange tongue.—I've just picked up the latest ish from the corner vendor. Sneaking home with the illo under my jacket. I met my pet BEM.—"

I'm not pleased by stream-of-consciousness poets who are not pleased with the magazine.

I find annoying, readers who make a battle-ground out of the readers page. I do not care what the natives are wearing in 5000 A.D. I don't give a damn whether a spear-and-sword civilization exists in the same "time-period" with space ships.

(Continued on page 109)



THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS

By CHARLES DYE

Bryce Carter could afford a smug smile. For hadn't he risen gloriously from Thieves Row to director of famed U.T.? Was not Earth, Moon, and all the Belt, at this very moment awaiting his command for the grand coup? And wasn't his cousin-from-Montehedo a star-sent help?

"WHAT do I do for a living?" repeated the slim dark-skinned young man in the next seat of the Earth-Moon liner. "I'm a witch doctor," he answered with complete sincerity.

"What do you do? I mean, what do they hire you for?" asked Donahue with understandable confusion and a touch of nervousness.



Bracing themselves, Bryce and Pierce gave the body a combined strong shove toward Earth. Two gone.

"I'm registered as a psychotherapist," said the dark-skinned young man. He looked too young to be practicing a profession, barely nineteen, but that could be merely a sign of talent, Donahue reflected. The new teaching and testing methods graduated them young.

"I know I am a witch doctor because my grandfather and his father and his father's father were witch doctors and I learned a special technique from my uncles who are registered therapists with medical degrees like mine. But the technique is not the one you find in the books, it is . . . unusual. They don't say where they learned it but it's not hard to guess." The dark youth shrugged cheerfully. "So—I'm a witch doctor."

"That's an interesting thought," said Donahue. It would be a long three day trip to the Moon and he had expected to be bored, but this conversation was not boring. "What do you do?" he again asked. "Specifically." Donahue had rugged features, a dark tan and attractively sun-bleached hair worn a little too long. He exuded a sort of rough charm which branded him one of the class of politicians, and he knew how to draw people out, so now he settled himself more comfortably for an extended spell of listening. "Tell me more and join me in a drink." He signalled the hostess and continued with the right mixture of admiring interest and condescending scepticism. "You don't chant spells and hire ghosts, do you?"

"Not exactly." The dark innocent looking young face smiled with a cheerful flash of white teeth. "I'll tell you what I did to a man, a man named Bryce Carter."

A GROUP of men sat in a skyscraper at Cape Hatteras, with their table running parallel to a huge floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the clouded sky and gray waves of the Atlantic. They were the respected directors of Union Transport, and, like most men of high position, they had a keen sense of self-preservation and a knowledge of ways and means that included little in the way of scruples.

The chairman rapped lightly. "Gentlemen, your attention please. I have an announcement to make."

The buzz of talk at the long table stopped

and the fourteen men turned their faces. The meeting had been called a full week early, and they expected some emergency as an explanation. "A disturbing announcement, I am afraid. Someone is using this corporation for illegal purposes." The chairman's voice was mild and apologetic.

Bryce Carter, second from the opposite end, was brought to a shock of tense balanced alertness. How much did he know? He gave no sign of emotion, but reached for a cigarette to cover any change in his breathing, fumbling perhaps more than usual.

The men at the long table waited, showing a variety of bored expressions that never had any connection with their true reactions. The chairman was a small, inconspicuous, sandy-haired man whose ability they respected so deeply that they had elected him the chairman to have him where they could watch him. They knew he was not one to mention trifles, and there was a moment of silence. "All right, John," said one, letting out his held breath and leaning back, "I'll bite. What kind of illegal purposes?"

"I don't know much," the small man apologized, "Only that the crime rate has risen forty percent in the average of the cities served by UT, and in Callastro City, Callastro, and Panama City, where we just put in a spaceport, it more than doubled."

"Funny coincidence," someone grunted. "Very funny," said another. "If the police notice it, and the public hears of it—"

There was no man there who would willingly have parted with his place at that table, no one who was unaware that in fighting his way to a place at that table he had seized some part of control of the destiny of the solar system.

UT—Union Transport, spread the meshes of its transportation service through almost every city of Earth and the hamlets and roads and bus and railroad and airlines between—and even to the few far ports where mankind had found a toehold in space. But its existence was precariously balanced on public trust.

UT's unity from city to city and country to country, its spreading growth had saved the public much discomfort and expense of overlapping costs and transfers and confusion, and so the public, on the advice of economists, grudgingly allowed UT to grow

ever bigger. There was a conservative movement to put all such outsize businesses under government ownership as had been the trend in the last generation but the economy was mushrooming too fast for the necessary neatness, and the public rightly would not trust politicians in any operation too confusing for them to be watched, and preferred to leave such businesses to private operation, accepting the danger for the profit of efficient and penurious operation, dividends and falling costs.

But all these advantages were barely enough to buy UT's life from year to year. It had grown too big.

Its directors held power to make or break any city and the prosperity of its inhabitants by mere small shifts in shipping fees, a decision to put in a line, or a terminal, or a crossroad. The power was indirectly recognized in the honors and higher offices, the free entertainment and lavish privileges available to them from any chamber of commerce and any political representative, lobbying discreetly for a slight bias of choice that would place an airport or spaceport in their district rather than another.

Perhaps some of the directors used their position for personal pleasure and advantage, but power used for the sake of controlling the direction of growth of races and nations, power for its own sake was the game which was played at that table, its members playing the game of control against each other and the world for high stakes of greater control, nursing behind their untelling faces who knows what megalomaniac dreams of dominion.

Yet they used their control discreetly, serving the public welfare and keeping the public good-will. When it was possible.

As always Bryce Carter sat relaxed, lazily smiling, his expression not changing to his thoughts.

"Who knows of this besides us?" someone asked.

The chairman answered mildly. "It was a company statistician in the publicity department who noticed it. He was looking for favorable correlations, I believe." His pale blue eyes ranged across their faces, touching Bryce Carter's face expressionlessly in passing. "I requested that he tell no one else until I had investigated." He added apologetically, "Commitments for drug ad-

diction correlate too."

That was worse news. "Narcotics investigators are no fools," someone said thoughtfully.

NEISWANGER, a thin orderly man near the head of the table, pressed his fingertips together, frowning slightly. "I take it then that our corporation is being used as a criminal means of large scale smuggling of drugs, transport of criminals on false identification and transport for resale of the goods resulting from their thefts. Is that correct?" Neiswanger always liked to have things neatly listed.

"I think so," said the chairman.

"And you would say that the organization responsible is centered in this corporation?"

"It would seem likely, yes."

The members of the board stirred uneasily, seeing a blast of sensational headlines, investigations which would spread to their private lives, themselves giving repetitive testimony to inquisitive politicians in a glare of television lights while the Federated Nations anti-cartel commission vivisected the UT giant into puny, separate squabbling midgets.

It was not an appealing prospect.

"We'll have to stop it, of course," said a lean, blond man whose name was Stout. He could be relied on to say the obvious and keep a discussion driving to the point. "I understand we have a good detective agency. If we put them on this with payment for speed and silence—"

"And when we know who is responsible," asked Neiswanger, "Then what do we do?"

There was silence as they came to another full stop in thinking. Turning culprits over to the police was out of the question, an admission that such crimes had happened, and could happen again. Firing the few detected could not impress the undetected and unfired ones enough to discourage them from their profitable criminality.

"Hire some killings," said the round faced Mr. Beldman, with simplicity.

The chairman laughed. "You are joking of course, Mr. Beldman."

"Of course," said Mr. Beldman, and laughed barkingly, being well aware of the permanent film record taken of all meet-

ings. But he was not joking. Nobody there was joking.

The detective agency and the hired killers would be arranged for.

Bryce Carter leaned back with the slight cynical smile on his lean face that was his habitual expression. "Suppose the top man is high in the company?" he suggested softly. "What then?" He did not need to point out that the disappearance of such a man would be enough to start a police and stockholders investigation of the company in itself. The implication was clear. Such a man could not be touched.

"A hypnotist," suggested Raal. "Someone to make our top man back track and clean up his own mess."

"Illegal, dangerous and difficult, Mr. Raal," Irving said sourly. "There are extremely severe penalties against any complicity in the unsupervised use of hypnotism or hypnotic drugs, and their use against the will of the subject is a major crime."

"A circulating company psychologist would be legal," suggested the lean blond man whose name was Stout.

"We have over seventy-five of those on the company payrolls already and I fail to see what use—"

"One of the special high priced boys who iron out kinks in groups by joining them and working with them for a while, like that Conference Manager we had with us last year. Every member of the group that hires one has to sign an application for treatment, and a legal release. They are very quiet and don't broadcast what they do or who they talked with, but they have a good record of results. The groups who hire them report better work and easier work. We could use one as a trouble shooter."

"Are they a special organization?" someone asked. "I think I've heard of them."

"Yes, some sort of a union. I can't remember the name."

"What would you expect them to do for us?" asked Irving.

"I hear—" Stout said vaguely, his eyes wandering from face to face, "that they have a special tough technique for hard case trouble makers." For those who knew him, the vague look was a veil over some thought which pleased him. Presumably he was thinking the thing which had occurred to them all.

THE culprit might be a member of the Board. There was a sudden cheerful interest visible among them as they wondered who was quarry for the "tough treatment."

"I've heard of that," said Wan Lun, remembering. "It has been said that they not only do not inform others of the fact of treatment but frequently do not inform the man under treatment but seem to be only a new friend until—poof." He smiled. "I think the guild name is Manoba. The Manoba Group."

Stout said, "They'll probably charge enough for the skill."

Wan said, smiling, "I also heard some idle rumor that in a few such cases discord within a group was alleviated by sudden suicide. Presumably a psychologist can grow impatient and push a certain button in the mind—"

"Sounds like a good idea," Beldman said. "Do you think if we offered this Manoba the right kind of money—"

"You don't mean that, Mister Beldman," cut in the chairman reprovingly. "You're joking again."

"We're all great jokers," said Beldman, and laughed.

Everyone laughed.

"I move we vote a sum for the hiring of a Manoba psychologist."

"Seconded, how about five hundred thousand?"

"I don't know their fees," the chairman objected cautiously.

"You can turn back any surplus. We stand to lose more than that by several orders of magnitude. Spend it at your discretion."

"Make it seven hundred thousand. Give him a little more room."

"I so move."

"Seconded."

"Carry it to a vote."

They slipped their hands under the table edge before their respective seats, and each man ran his fingers over two buttons concealed there, before him, chose between the *yes* and the *no* button and pushed one, the choice of his fingers unseen by the others.

Two numbers lit up on the small divided panel before the chairman. He looked at them with his mild face expressionless. "Rejected by one vote."

Unanimity was the law on Board decisions, which by a natural law was probably the reason why no love was lost among them, but this time irritation was curbed by interest. They sat watching each other's expressions with glances which seemed casual. Whose was the one vote?

"I move that the vote be repeated and made open," someone said.

"Seconded."

"All in favor of the appropriation for the psychologist raise your left hand," the chairman requested.

They complied and looked at each other. All hands were up.

"Carried on the second vote," the chairman said without apparent interest. "For my own curiosity will the gentleman who voted nay on the secret vote the first time speak up and explain his objections, and why he changed his mind on the open vote?"

There was silence a moment—Neiswanger looking at his neat fingernails, Bryce Carter smoking, and smiling slightly as he always smiled, Stout leaning back casually scanning his eyes from face to face. Beldman lit a cigar and released a cloud of blue smoke with a contented sigh. No one spoke.

"Gentlemen," said the chairman. "It is entirely likely that the culprit is among us."

"Never mind the melodrama, John," Irving tapped the table impatiently. "We've dealt with that. Let's get on to the next business."

II

IN THE exit lounge at floor five Bryce Carter stopped a moment and glanced at himself in the mirror. Thick neck, thick body—a physique so evenly and heavily muscled that it looked fat until he moved. Atop the thick body a lean face that he didn't like stared back at him. It was darkly tanned, with underlying freckles that were almost black. Years had passed since he had worked in space, but the space-tan remained indelible. It was not a bland or pretty face.

At the dinner, deep in discussion with Mr. Wan, he had been surprised to find himself smiling at intervals, irrepressibly. He hoped it had looked cordial, and not too much like a cat enjoying the company of mice.

They had no defense against him. The drugs organization could never be traced to him. The connection was too well concealed. Even the organization knew nothing about him.

The only evidence which could make the connection was in his own mind. The only witness against him was himself. He cast his mind back over the meeting and dinner but there had been no slips past the first shock of the chairman's announcement, and that had been unobserved by anyone. The psychologist they had hired might perhaps get a betraying flicker of expression from him in an interview, many well-trained observers of human reactions could read expressions that keenly, but the interviewing of all the Board by the psychologist was not likely. The Directors of the Board were even now climbing into trains and strato planes to scatter back to the far points of the earth. It would take many days for an investigating psychologist to follow to interview each one. He and Irving would be last on the list, for he went to Moonbase City, and Irving to Luna City.

He had weeks.

He smiled, fastening bands in his cuffs that folded them tightly on his wrists, zipping up his suitcoat and slipping on gloves. He looked at himself again. Where he had been wearing a conservative dark silk business suit with a short cape, he now seemed to be wearing a tailored ski-suit with an odd cowl, or a pressure suit without boots or helmet, which was what it was. Carrying the zipper up further would have turned the cape to an airtight helmet bubble.

Employes and executives passing in and out of the UT building gave the clothes an approving and interested glance as they passed. The justification by utility was obvious. It had cost money to have a pressure suit designed light and flexible enough for comfortable wear, but long ago he had grown irked by the repetitious business of climbing in and out of clothes every time one stepped through a space lock, while overcapcs and hoods were needed stepping outside of any temperate zone Earth building in winter.

A pressure suit was completely independent of weather and regulated its own internal heat. Since the suit had been designed the manufacturer had begun to re-

ceive an increasing number of orders for duplicates, and was now being put into mass production. Probably in these five minutes he had just made many more sales for the manufacturer.

He was setting a style, he thought in pleased surprise, stepping out of the building. The salt wind hit him with a blast of cold, and the automatic thermostatic wiring in the suit countered with a wave of warmth as he leaned into the wind and started to walk. The connection between the Union Hotel and the building he had just left was an arched sidewalk that curved between them, five stories above the sand and surf.

The hotel was an impressively towering building against the ragged sky, and as he walked a gleam broke through from the hidden sunset and spotlighted it and the low scudding clouds in a sudden glowing red. He stopped and leaned against the balustrade to watch the red gleams reflecting from the bay. Red and purple clouds fled by low overhead, their colors changing as they moved. This was something a man couldn't see in space or on the moon.

But after a moment he couldn't fully enjoy it, because he was being watched. The feeling was disturbing.

Damn rubbernecks, he thought, and turned irritably, half hoping that at least it would be an acquaintance or some pretty girls.

But there was no one watching him.

A few pedestrians walked by hurriedly because it was growing dark and the view that they had come to enjoy was fading. The wind wrapped their enveloping capes around them and made them all look abnormally tall and columnar.

It was darker. The sidewalk lights abruptly flicked on in a flood of amber light that thickened the twilight beyond their circle to an opaque purple curtain of darkness.

He noticed a pedestrian walking slowly towards him from the direction he had come. The figure approached more slowly than seemed natural, with his head bowed and his hands in his pockets as though lost in thought.

A TRAILER from the detective agency? It was too soon for that. If it were arranged that every member of the Board



be trailed, still it could not have been arranged and begun so soon.

Besides, there was something more deadly than that in the walking man's indifference.

A killer arranged by Beldman? It would be natural for Beldman or Stout to take a chance and fight back the direct way. But there was no evidence. How could either of them have decided who to blame or who to fight?

The few huge buildings that stood dark against the night sky were being brightened now by lights going on in hundreds of windows. In long slender spans between them stretched the aerial walks and the necklaces of amber lights that outlined them. The wind blew colder across the walks and the view of sea and sky that had been visible from them now was blotted out by night. The walkers were going in. There was small chance of sheltering himself in a crowd, or even of keeping only one or two walkers between himself and the one who followed him.

At the first sight of the approaching figure he had instinctively leaned back against the concrete railing and taken his gun from its pocket holster, holding it lightly in his gloved hand.

An aged couple and a vigorous middle-aged woman hurrying in the opposite direction glanced at him without interest or alarm. His pose was not menacing, and anyway most men with money enough to travel carried hand arms.

This was an indirect effect of a Federated Nations ruling that only hand arms of

a regulated deadliness be manufactured as the armament of nations. The ruling had been carefully considered for other secondary effects, for any nation growing overcentralized and militaristic was likely to arm its citizens universally for greater military power by numbers, and then suffer the natural consequences of having armed their public opinion.

An armed man need not vote to be counted, and once having learned that lesson, the feeling that an armed man carried his bill of rights in his pocket made this the first clause of the written and unwritten constitutions of many suddenly democratic nations. "The right of the yeomanry to carry arms shall not be abridged." They kept their guns.

And with weapons instantly available to hot tempers, dueling came back into custom in most places.

All this had little effect on the large calm manufacturing countries who had run the UN and now ran the FN, but it made easy their decision that since, in space, policing is almost impossible, the citizens who venture there must be armed to protect themselves. Thus, in spite of the continued outcry of a minority of Christian moralists, a holster pocket was now built into all space suits.

Bryce had grown up in a famine country, an almost unpoliced area, and weapons had been as familiar to his hands as fingers since he had passed twelve. And when, as a steelworker, he had been one of the first settlers in the foundry towns of the Asteroid Belt, he had found life no gentler there. But it was all right as far as he was concerned. He had heard of safer and duller ways to live but had never wanted them. Life as a moonbased transport manager had been a short interval of nonviolence, five years of startling calm which he had not yet grown accustomed to.

The gun fitted into his hand as comfortably as his thumb, or as the handshake of an old and trusted friend, but it was useless here. Reluctantly he slipped it back into his pocket and began walking again. A director of UT couldn't shoot people on intuition.

He had barely stopped for a count of ten, and there was still distance between them when he had turned, but the follower could

be walking faster now, narrowing the distance between them.

If he had waited and fired, an inspection of the man's pockets could have confirmed his judgment by the finding of an assassin's illegal needle gun. That alone might be enough to satisfy the police if he were still merely a spaceworker, but a Director of UT couldn't live that casually. It would be difficult to explain his certainty to the police, and still more difficult to explain to the newspapers. He could not afford that sort of publicity.

Bryce let out a soft curse and lengthened his stride.

He had to wait for proof of the follower's intentions. And the only proof would be to be attacked, and the first proof of that, since needle guns are soundless and inconspicuous, would probably be a curare-loaded needle in his back.

After that the follower could inconspicuously drop his weapon over the balustrade, its self-destructing mechanism set to melt it before it reached the sands far below.

However since the follower certainly would not openly run after him, the most logical thing to do, Bryce decided, was to run to the hotel as if he were in a hurry. The idea irritated him.

He walked on, slowing perversely. It was irrational to walk, and he knew it, but he walked, and the knowledge that it was irrational irritated him further. The skin between his shoulder blades itched meditatively in its own imaginative anticipation of an entering needle. What good did it do him to be proud of his brains when he put himself in a spot where he walked around like a target?

He controlled a rising rage but he walked.

The sky was totally dark now and there were only two or three couples ahead on the slender concrete span and one old couple he had just passed, so that they were between himself and the follower. But that was no adequate screen.

Far above soared the sky taxis. And now he wanted a taxi. He was approaching a place where there was a hack stand. Just ahead, at the midway point, where the upward curve of the sidewalk leveled off and began to curve down, a narrow catwalk jutted into space with a small landing platform at its end. "TAXI" a luminescent ar-

row glowed at him directly as he came abreast of it.

HE WALKED rapidly out along the railed catwalk, making a perfect target he knew, silhouetted against the glow. He cursed under his breath, reaching the end of it. Here he made an even more perfect target, with the single bright light that poured down brilliance on the bench and landing platform spotlighting him against the darkness of the night. The bench was thin iron grillwork. It offered no cover.

He needed cover. He considered the white concrete pillar of the lamp, put his hand on the railing and jumped up to sit on the railing casually, a one hundred fifty foot fall behind him and the width of the lamp post between him and the follower, who now was an unmoving figure leaning against the railing of the sidewalk near where the catwalk began.

The sight of the insolently lounging figure did nothing to sooth his irritation. This escape was not the way he wanted to deal with a threat. There was an oddity in the man's waiting. The range was poor, and he probably was not firing, although he would look as if he were not in any case, but if he were not going to take this chance for his murder attempt, why did he openly exhibit himself, arousing suspicion and cutting off future chances? An innocent stroller or even a mere trailer from the detective agency would have strolled on.

Above came the nearing drone of a taxi which had spotted him in the bright pool of light at the hack stand.

There was something in the careless confidence of the follower's open interest in him that raised his neck hair as no direct threat could have, and filled the rumble of the night-hidden surf with obscure menace. The man acted as if his job was over, clinched.

Bryce reached the answer as the taxi floated down on hissing rotor blades and settled to the platform. Sliding down from the railing he walked toward it, stiff-legged. The light was out inside it, and the caddy did not climb out or attempt to open the door for him. Bryce turned his head and looked back as if for a last glance at the watching figure, grasping the door handle with his right hand as if fumbling blindly. He was

left handed. When the door was open a crack, it stopped opening, and those inside saw the muzzle of a magnamatic in his left hand looking through the crack at them.

It's easier to catch wolves if you're disguised as a rabbit, Pop Yak had told him once. He must have looked a complete sucker, starting to climb into a dark cab with his head turned backward!

"Don't move," Bryce said, some of his anger reaching his voice in a biting rasp. Inside, the driver was frozen with his head turned enough to see the glint of a muzzle behind his neck, and in the darkened far corner of the back seat where there should have been no one there was the pale blur of a face, and a hand holding something. Bryce knew that there was no way a shot could reach him except through the shielding steel door or the shatterproof window, and a man would hesitate before shooting through glass when he was looking down the throat of Bryce's gun. Bryce waited for him to think it over.

The hand of the man in the back seat came into focus as his eyes adjusted to the dark inside, and he could see that it was holding a gun. The gun was not pointing at anything in particular. It was frozen in mid-motion. The man had a half-smile frozen on his face, probably in the way he had been smiling just before Bryce spoke.

"Open your hand. Drop it." The glint of the gun disappeared, and there was a faint thud from the floor. Bryce opened the door and slid into the rear seat, watchful for motion, ready to shoot. "Face front!" They faced front like two puppets, perhaps the uncontrollable rasp in his voice was convincing. He still did not know whose men they were, or why they had been hired. It would be no use questioning them for they would not know either. He could guess who it was, a name came to mind, but there was no way of checking up. This kind of business did not fit well with the crucial balance of his plans for the next two weeks. "Be careful," he said perhaps unnecessarily, "I'm nervous. Union Hotel please."

The short ride to the hotel was made in dead silence, with the man in the opposite corner barely moving enough to blink his eyes. He was middle-aged, with the resigned sagging lines to his face of ambition disappointed, but he sat with a waiting still-

ness that Bryce recognized as something to watch. There was probably another gun within quick reach of that passive right hand.

The roter drifted down to a landing space on the floodlighted landing roof of the hotel and settled with a slight bump. "Don't move." The clumsy careful business of opening the door backward with his right hand and sliding out without taking his eyes from either of them was tediously slow.

Once out, he slammed the door briskly. "Take off." Not until the red and green lights had faded into the distance did he turn away, pocket his gun and walk into the wide doorway to the elevators. As he brushed past the hotel detective standing in the doorway the detective was reholstering a large size police pacifier. Apparently he had been ready to impartially stun everyone concerned at the first sign of trouble, which probably explained why those in the aircab had not attempted any retaliation. The detective gave Bryce a cold stare as he went by, probably in disapproval of guests waving weapons on hotel premises.

III

IN HIS luxurious hotel room Bryce checked his watch. Eight o'clock. A telephone call was scheduled for some time in the half hour. He filed the question of who was behind the night's attack and picked up the phone. The dial system was in automatic contact with any city in the world. He dialed.

Somewhere in a city a phone rang. It rang unheard, for it was locked into a safe in a tiny rented office with some unusual mechanisms attached. The ringing was stopped abruptly and a recorded voice answered, "Yeah?"

Bryce took a dial phone from the night table where it had been sitting innocently like a toy he had bought for some child. "Hi Al," he said cheerfully to the automatic mechanism at the other end. "Listen, I think I've got a new phrase for that transition theme. How's this?" He put the receiver against the back of the toy and dialed the toy dial. It responded to each letter and number with a ringing note of different pitch that played a short unmelodious tune.

The pitch notes went over the line and

entered the mechanism, making the contacts within it that dialed the number he had dialed on the toy phone.

"How's that?" Bryce said cheerfully.

The recorded voice said, "Sounds good. I'll see what I can do with it." Somewhere far away and unheard another phone had begun to ring. "Want to speak to George?"

"Sure."

A phone rang in a pay booth somewhere in a great city railroad station, and someone browsing at a magazine stand or sitting on a suitcase apparently waiting for a train strolled casually to answer it.

"Hello?" said a noncommittal voice, prepared to claim that he was merely a stranger answering the phone because it was ringing in public.

"Hello George, how's everything going?" Bryce asked. Those words were his trade mark, the passwords that identified him to everyone as the Voice who gave Tips. Among the monster organization which had grown from the proven reliability of those tips, the voice was known as "Hello George." Hello George's tips were always good, so they had come to be followed as blindly as tips from God, even when they were not understood. Certainty was one thing men in the fencing and drug smuggling business most sorely lacked.

They communicated only by phone. They transmitted their wares by leaving them in public lockers and mailing the key. They never saw each other's faces or heard each other's names, but even the use of a key could be a trap that would bring a circle of narcotics agents of INC around the unfortunate who attempted to open the locker.

Far away over the bulge of the Earth between, a man sat in a phone booth waiting for his tip. "Pretty well. No complaints. How's with you, any news?"

"I think you'd better cut connections with Union Transport. They're getting pretty sloppy. I think they might spill something."

"Wadja say?" asked the man at the other end cautiously, "I didn't get you."

"Better stop using UT for shipping," Bryce repeated, wording his sentence carefully. They aren't careful enough anymore. You don't want them to break an inc case wide open, do you?" INC was the International Narcotics Control agency of the F. N. But the conversation would have

sounded like an innocent discussion of shipping difficulties to any chance listener on the telephone lines.

The flat tones were plaintive and aggrieved. "But we're expecting a load of stuff Friday. Our buyers are expecting it." Stuff was drug, and expecting was a mild word for the need of drug addicts! "And we've got a lotta loads of miscellaneous items to go out." The contact was a small man in the organization but he evidently knew just how "hot" fenced goods could be. "That can't wait!"

He had planned this. "Maybe they are all right for shipments this week. I'll chew them out to be careful, check up and call back Friday. Meanwhile break with them."

"Tell them a few things from me, the—" the distant voice added a surprising string of derogatory adjectives. "Friday when?"

"Friday about—about six." The double "about" confirmed the signal for a telephone appointment that was general for all contact numbers.

"Friday about six, Okay." There was a faint click that meant he had hung up and the phone in the safe was open for more dialings on his toy dial.

Bryce hung up, leaned back on his bed and pushed a button that turned on the radio to a semiclassical program. Soothing music came into the room and slow waves of colored light moved across the ceiling. He tuned to a book player, and chose a heavy economics study from the current seller list of titles which appeared on the ceiling. The daily moon ship was scheduled to blast off at five thirty, its optimum at this week's position of the Moon. By this time tomorrow night, he and all the other members of the Board would be out of reach of any easy observation or analysis by their hired psychological mind-hunter.

With a slight chilling of the skin he remembered the cop-psychos the gangs had warned him about in his scrambling and desperate childhood, and what they were supposed to do to you when they caught you in a third offense.

He had been born into an ex-European quarter in a Chinese city, a descendent of something prideful and forgotten called an Empire Builder, and grew with the mixed gangs of children of all colors who roamed the back streets at night, looting and steal-

ing and breaking. Population control was almost impossible in a land where the only social security against starvation in old age was sons, and social security was impossible in a land so corrupted by the desperation of famines, so little able to spare the necessary taxes. The nation was too huge to be fed from outside, and so had been left by the FN to stew in its own misery until its people solved their basic problem.

So, in an enlightened clean and wealthy world, Bryce Carter had grown up in a slum whose swarming viciousness was a matter of take, steal, kill, climb or die. Perhaps under those special circumstances police penal compulsion had to be brutally strong, stronger than the drive for life itself, as brutal as the lurid tales he had heard. Perhaps in other countries the methods were different, a hypno-converted man not a horror to his friends, but he had had no time to study and investigate if it were so, and the horror and hatred remained.

But there was no need to think about the psycho-hunter the Board had put on him for by the time the hunter could reach him UT would have fallen as a legal entity, its corruption would be completely public, and the psychologist would be called off before discovering anything. Bryce thought of the slight nervousness he had let show at the first words of the chairman's announcement. The only witness against him was himself. His control wasn't perfect. No one's was. But he was safe.

He concentrated on the opening pages of the Basic Principles of Economics.

IN THE darkened UT building which I could be seen from his window a few lights still burned where the night shift dealt with emergencies.

In a small projection room on the fifty-fifth floor a man sat and looked at a film of the UT Board meeting of that day. He played only a certain small twenty minute interval, listening closely to the voices—"Gentlemen, your attention please—" "Watching the faces—" "Do the police know of this?" . . . "Do you think if we offered this Manoba the right kind of money . . ." "Will the gentleman who voted nay on the secret vote the first time speak up and explain . . ." "It is entirely likely that the conspirator is among us." On the screen showed

the apparently bored faces and relaxed poses of men accustomed to the power game, habitually masking their feelings from each other, shifting their positions slightly sometimes, some smoking. "We've dealt with that, let's get on to the next business."

The watcher stopped the film and silently reset it. It began again with the chairman on the screen rapping the table lightly. "Gentlemen, your attention . . ."

In the darkened projection room the chairman sat to one side smoking and thinking while the psychologist played the film through for the fourth time.

The chairman was wondering just how seriously the watcher was taking Mr. Beldman's proposals about what he should do to the culprit, and whether he would raise his fee.

The telephone rang.

"Four thirty, Mr. Carter," said the voice of the night clerk in the receiver.

It was time to catch the five thirty Moon ship. He splashed cold water on his face and the back of his neck until he was awake, took a hot shower, dressed rapidly, and gave up his key at the desk at 4:45.

"A letter for you, Mister Carter," she smiled, handing it to him. From the wall speakers a mild but penetrating voice began repeating, "Bus line for spaceport leaving in twelve minutes. All passengers for Luna City, Moon Base, Astroid Belt and points out, please go to the landing deck. Bus line for spaceport leaving in twelve minutes—"

He opened the letter when he had settled down in a comfortable morris chair in the airbus. The letterhead said MANOBA Group Psychotherapeutic Research and Conference Management.

One sheet of it was a half page contract in fine print, apparently a standard form with the name of Union Transport Corporation typed in the appropriate blanks. Above it was printed in clear English and large type for the benefit of those readers unaccustomed to contracts. "WARNING. After you have signed this release you have no legal recourse or claim as an individual against any physical or mental injury or inconvenience you may claim to have sustained as a result of the activities of the contracted psychotherapist(s) in the course of

group therapy. Your group is the responsible agent. It must make all claims and complaints as a unit, and may withdraw from the contract as a unit. Those who withdraw from the group withdraw from participation in the contract."

Bryce smiled. Or in other words, if you didn't like it, you could quit your job and get out!

The other sheet he glanced at casually. It seemed to be an explanatory page to the effect that the Manoba's work was strictly confidential and they were under no obligation to explain what they had done or were doing or give their identities to any member of the corporation who had hired them. There was nothing resembling a sales talk about results, and the only thing approaching it was a stiff last sentence referring anyone who was curious about the results of such treatment to the National Certified Analytical Statistics of Professional Standing in such and such bulletins of such and such years.

He signed the contract, smiling, and mailed it at a handy postal and telegraph window at the spaceport before boarding the spaceship.

THE phone was ringing.

Bryce rolled over sleepily and picked it up. "Eight A.M. L.S. S.S. Sir, said the soft voice of the desk clerk.

"Okay," he grunted, glancing at his watch and hanging up. It was two minutes after eight, but he didn't check her up on it. If he placed the voice rightly, it belonged to an exceptionally pretty brunette. He had not tried to date her yet, but she looked accessible, and Mona was becoming tiresome.

He turned the dial in the headboard that reversed the polarization of the window and rose reluctantly, stretching as sunlight flooded the room. It was daylight on Moonbase City. It had been daylight for a week, and it would be daylight still for another week.

Through the softening filter of the airtight glass the view of distant crater walls and the airsealed towers of Moonbase City shone in etched magnificence, but he gave it only a glance. It was always the same. There was no weather on the Moon and no variety of view.

"Good morning," he smiled, passing a bellboy in the luxurious, deep colored halls,

"Good morning, Mister Carter," the boy answered rapidly with an eager nervous smile.

Bryce had caught the management up sharply on several small lapses, and they all knew him now. He strode on, pleased. Efficiency. . . . No one gave him a second glance or noticed him in the tube trains, but he was not irritated by it. Someday they would. Someday the whole world would know his face as well as they knew their own. He promised that to them silently and then settled down to concentrate on some constructive planning before reaching the office. He was not going to waste his time gawking at ads or listening to the music like the others.

"Mister Carter?" said a hesitant voice behind him as he was reaching for the handle of the office doors.

"What is it?" he asked crisply, turning, but as he saw who had spoken he knew exactly what it would be.

"Pardon me Mister Carter, but—" It was a spaceman, a skinny wreck of a man in clothes that hung on him. A junky, a drug addict, Bryce knew the signs. He had spent all his money and gone without food for his drug, and now he had remembered from Belt talk that Bryce Carter was a soft touch for a loan. "Never mind," Bryce snarled, reaching for the door again.

He assisted the smuggling of the stuff but that did not mean that he had to admire the fools who took it. The man was muttering something about a loan when the door shut and cut off his words. The loan would be spent on more junk. If he had wanted food he could have signed into a state hospital to take the Cure, and be imprisoned and fed until the hunger for his drug had passed and released him. The Cure was a brief hell, but it was fair payment for having had his fun, and if the addict had any guts he would face it. Any time he was ready to pay the price of exit he could go back to being a man.

Bryce strode through the offices irritably. It did not matter if Earthlings chose to waste their time in artificial ecstasy, but it was different to see a good Belt spaceman let himself go.

The receptionist looked up with fright in her eyes as he passed and gave him a special good-morning, with a smile that was

tremulous and very eager to please. He still had her in the stage of new employment where she was kept afraid of losing her new job with a bad reference. It was best to put them all over the hurdles at first.

He gave her a condescending smile as he went through into the inner offices. "Good morning." She was shaky enough. A few well faked cold-rages against minor errors had done well. From now on she would need only smiles to give the utmost in loyalty and hard work. What had Machiavelli said? "Make them fear your wrath, and they will be grateful for your forbearance."

He did not bother to speak to Kesby when he passed his open office door. Kesby didn't need smiles or praise, he worked loyally just for the rare curt acknowledgement that he had done well. Three years of managing had made him a good lieutenant, completely faithful. When Bryce quit Union Transport Kesby would follow him.

IV

HE WENT into his luxurious inner office with its deep rugs and eye-relaxing colors and its comfortable wide desk with its speaker box and telephones that were like the nerve wires of power, and sat down comfortably like a king on a throne or a mule skinner in the driver's seat with ten pairs of reins in each hand. He never felt completely awake and up to his full size in the morning until he was here.

There was a good stack of letters and memos on the desk waiting for him. On top of the mail stack was a letter labeled PRIVATE in a beamed spacegram envelope. He did not recognize the name at the head of it but the return address was General Delivery, Reef Three, The Belt. It read:

Something urgent has come up. Must see you. Arrange when. Bob. Roberto Orillo, who had been his manager in the small line that UT had taken from him, now the owner of a tiny line of his own which carefully avoided competition with UT in the Belt.

"Arrange when." They could only meet in secret. What would Orillo want to discuss?

The theory he had held in the back of his mind for three days gave answer—Murder! It was Orillo who was behind the attempted attack on Earth. This meeting was

another trap. Orillo wanted him dead.

Roberto Orillo had been his first helper with the shipping and delivery service Bryce had built up from the days when he had been merely an asteroid prospector with a ship overstocked with supplies and an obliging willingness to sell his surplus.

After he put his traveling stores on schedule he noticed that an increasing number of people began moving into the Belt to settle along his route without investing in the proper ship or supplies, depending on him, using his ship for a store and bus service, swelling his profits. He found that wherever he chose to extend a route and offer credit for a stake settlers would appear and a community begin to grow.

He absorbed that lesson and laid plans.

UT blocked them. Running his store ships on their regular rounds, making loans, mediating deals, taking half interests in ideas that looked profitable, selling fuel and power, subtly binding his customers to him with bonds of dependency deeper than peonage, Bryce found suddenly that UT, whose trade mark had never been seen in the Belt before, had slipped in five ships patterned precisely after his, but larger, more magnificent and expensive, and set them running on the same course as his but one day ahead. His customers told him. They were apologetic but they had bought at the ship which came earliest, enticed by the glitter and the bargain prices.

It was a killing blow, and was obviously meant to be so. The UT managers were wise in the ways of power, and with limitless money could bankrupt him.

That day Bryce saw that he could not fight UT from outside, and he saw a dream of empire greater than Alexander ever dreamed of being ripped from his hands. When a tactful and conciliating offer came from UT for a merger and an exchange of stock at double its value, he saw it was an indirect bribe for his silent submission without complaints to Spaceways or to the Anti-Cartel Commission of the FN, and he saw that the only way to compete with the gigantic corporation was to destroy it from within.

He held out for a seat on the Board of Directors. They gave it to him.

And in three years had done an efficient job of corrupting and undermining UT

to the point where it was ready to fall. UT had a week more to live in respected public service before an outraged public tore it apart.

Bryce had left Orillo in the Belt to form a small delivery company servicing thinly settled outlying points where the profits were too small to disturb UT. It would be this company that would take over and buy out the UT equipment when Spaceways chopped up the monster corporation, and it was planned that Orillo offer Bryce full partnership when this event took place.

But perhaps Orillo objected to sharing his reign with a partner. And perhaps Orillo had always objected to the fact that Bryce was the only one who knew Orillo was a fugitive from justice. Bryce had never quite been able to tell what went on behind the handsome blond face and impassive blue eyes of his assistant.

Bryce had taken him in hand and given him a job after Orillo fled from a murder charge in South Africa. And Bryce had arranged the operations that gave Orillo a new face, new fingerprints and an unworried future. Only Bryce could now give the word to the police which could bring the examination that would show Orillo's retina tallied with that of a wanted man.

But if murder had always lain behind those impassive pale blue eyes, why had there been no attempts before? The answer to that was easy. Up to this time Bryce's activities had been profitable to Orillo. He had seen where Bryce's plans were leading and wanted them to succeed, so that he might step into Bryce's shoes and reap the results.

In three more months Bryce's death would be the death of a partner, and bring the unwanted spotlight of police investigation on Orillo himself, but now, at this point, the disappearance of Bryce Carter would bring police inquiry and suspicion only to the already shaky and undermined fabric of UT.

Bryce counted the profit and loss of his death to the man he had helped, and smiled ruefully. Yet the request for the meeting might be genuine and important. He had to take a chance on it and meet his ex-assistant and future partner somewhere far away from witnesses, recognition—or protection.

Taking a memo pad he printed, *I'll meet*

you Friday; 3:PM LM, and wrote in the coordinates of a position in space not very far out from Earth, indicated the radar blink signals for its buoy and clipped the memo sheet to the envelope with its false name and return address. Ringing for his secretary, he handed it to her.

"See that that gets beamed back immediately. Friend of mine seems to be in some sort of a jam."

That was that. He turned to his work. After an hour or so the intercom box clicked and Kesby said unexpectedly, "Visitor to see you, boss. Can I send him in?"

"Yes." The receptionist had strict orders to keep out everyone except those scheduled for appointment, and to announce the names and businesses of dubious cases for his deciding, but Kesby must have overridden her decision. He sounded confident. Probably someone important.

KESBY opened the door with an expression half nervous, half mischievous, "Your visitor," and closed it hastily as the person stepped in.

He didn't belong in there. It was obvious to Bryce that whoever he was, he had gotten in through a lie.

The young man who stood inside his office watching him was no one connected with the business. He was too young for any position of importance. The slender frailty of childhood was still with him. Yet that impression soon faded under the impressiveness of his stance. It was more than just arrogance or poise, it was an unshakable confidence. As if no failure could be conceived.

He stood balanced to move either forward or back. His voice was again a surprise. Absolute total clarity, almost without inflection as if the words reached the mind without needing a voice. "If you're going to throw me out, this is the best time to do it." Dark brown skin of one of the dark races, jet black straight hair, a dark pair of eyes that were merry and watchful and had the impact of something dangerous. Colossal gall, Bryce characterized it to himself. He might be as good as he thinks he is. He was probably selling the Brooklyn Bridge, and he should never have gotten in, but the fact that he had somehow gotten past Kesby made him worth a few questions before being thrown out.

"What do you want?"

He came forward to the desk to answer. "I want to be your right arm." He took out a pack of cigarettes, shaking one free and offering it with courtesy. "Have one?" Bryce shook his head and the boy put one between his own lips and put the pack away. "My name is Pierce," he said, lighting the cigarette with the flame cupped in his hands as if he were used to smoking in the wind. He looked up with his eyes squinting against the smoke, shook the match out and dropped it in the desk ash tray. "Roy Pierce."

He was as much at home as an invading army. Bryce felt an impulse to laugh.

He knew this kid very well, but he couldn't place where, when, or how. "Am I supposed to know the name?"

"Do you remember Pop Yak?"

Bryce remembered Pop Yak. He gave in with a sigh, and ordered in the singsong vernacular of his childhood. "Okay. Sitsselfdel, speeltalk cutchop!"

Pop Yak was a grizzled man who had watched Bryce fighting with another kid. Afterward he had taken Bryce into his store and given him ice cream and some pointers on dirty fighting. Not much had penetrated the first time but Bryce went back for advice again, learning that that was the place to be told how to do things and get what he wanted. Pop was always patient with his teaching, and always right.

He had chosen Bryce as his agent to sell minor drugs to the other kids and acted as a fence for the things he stole, and he encouraged him to study in the compulsory school and loaned him books. And Pop was the first to give him the tip on legitimate business and how to pull money on the right side of the law and make a profit they couldn't kick about. Good old Pop. "Will-pay." The boy sat down and leaned forward with a slight intent motion of a hand that was Pop's favorite gesture, one Bryce had picked up from him himself.

"He told me you're on the way up." Roy Pierce held him with a steady dark gaze. "I want a slice of that, and I want it the easy way, hitching my wagon to your rocket. You can use me. A big man is too public. You need a new hand and a new voice, one that does what you want done, and can do it in the dark or the light, without your name—

a stand-in for alibis, and a contriver of accidents so they break for you without your motion. A left arm that your enemies don't recognize as yours."

He was asking to be Bryce's substitute in the things that had to be done without connection to himself, and yet had to be done by Bryce himself, because no one could be trusted with the knowledge of them.

Could he be trusted? His coming could be another trap by the unidentified enemy. It was almost too providential, almost too well timed. "References and abilities?"

Roy Pierce reached into his wallet and handed out an aptitude profile card backed by the universal test score listings in training and skills on the other side. Bryce played with the card and studied the youth. The boy was well dressed in a dark tailored suit of the kind Bryce favored. He looked able, clean, cool and ruthless. "Armed?" Bryce asked.

A thing like a very thick cigar suddenly appeared in Pierce's hand. The end of it pointing at him was solid except for a very small hole. A needle gun, obviously, loaded with two and a half inch grooved drug carrying needles.

"Sleep or death?" Bryce asked.

"Sleep," Pierce said, putting it away. "It's licensed." Bryce wondered what made him so sure he could trust this kid. He analyzed while he questioned. He did not bother to look at the card.

"Languages?"

"Basic coast pidgin, symbolic and glot." Basic English and Poliglott, the two universals.

"Detector proofed?" Lie detectors could be a nuisance, for they were used casually and universally without needing the legal warrants and deference to constitutional immunities and medical supervision of hypno-questioning.

Pierce smiled with a flash of white teeth. "First thing I ever saved my money for."

Though they spoke standard English, Bryce had placed his intonations almost to the block he grew up in. Almost to the half block! He was as familiar as Pop Yak, as familiar as his own face in the mirror, and as understandable. Bryce knew the inside of his mind as well as if it were a suddenly attached lobe of his own. It was like looking back through time at himself

younger and less complex.

Pop Yak had turned out another on the same model, a younger simpler duplicate of himself. Pierce was doing exactly what he said, offering service to Bryce as he would offer him a sword, simply for the risk and delight of being an instrument in a power game with stakes as high as he had guessed Bryce's game to be. There was no danger of him being a plant, and no danger of him squealing under pressure: the risk of death or arrest was part of his pay.

"OKAY," Bryce said. He gestured with his head to a corner of the room behind him. "Sit over there. You're my cousin from Montehedo, and I'm showing you the town." He turned to his appointment pad again and read. After Pierce had placed a chair in the indicated position, Bryce said without turning. "This week I can use a bodyguard. Someone's hiring killers for me."

There was no sound of motion for a moment. Bryce got the idea that Pierce was more surprised than the fact warranted. But his question was gentle and deadly. "Any idea who?"

"The line forms to the left," Bryce said dryly. "Put away that needle gun and buy something legal that kills." He handed back a sheaf of letters, memos and graphs. "Read these and learn." For some reason he felt exhilarated.

He turned back to work, routing shipments, shifting rates to balance shifting costs, lowering rates for preliminary incentive on lines that could run at lower cost with a heavier load, occasionally using the Bell communication load analyzer and Kesby's formula analysis for a choice of ways of averting bottlenecks and overload slowdown points sometimes consulting the solar system maps on the walls.

Good service built up customer demand and dependency on good service. Producers manufacturing now on Earth with the new materials shipped in from space could not be cut off from access to the new materials without ruin to the manufacturers. Earth was becoming dependent on space transport.

Once the customers were given it, they grew to need it. He smiled at the thought. It was another kind of drug traffic, and

wielded the same kind of potentially infinite power over the customers.

One thing he had learned from the Economics tome he had struggled with four nights ago, a simple inexorable principle he had recognized dimly before—that since it was difficult and more expensive to ship out goods from Earth to space than it was to drop goods into Earth from space, eventually spacepeople might be independent of Earth, and Earth totally dependent on space products.

The potentialities of the business game were amazing past anything Pop Yak had ever hinted, but the funny thing was he had to find it out step by step for himself. That kind of excitement wasn't in stories. The adventures of explorers, research men, and detectives were written into stories, but not money men. The life and growth and death and blackmail of individuals were in the stories he had read, but not the murder of planets and cities, the control and blackmail of whole populations, in this odd legal game with the simple rules. Funny there hadn't been lurid stories about this in the magazines he read as a kid.

He grinned—Well, the kids would read about *him*. In fifteen years he'd have everyone under his thumb and they'd smile and bow and be frightened just speaking to him.

The work vanished rapidly, the pile of accumulated letters and reports dwindling, and the phone ringing at intervals.

Complaints he dealt with carefully, wording each letter in reply so as to give the impression that he, Bryce Carter, was personally breaking the corporation policy to satisfy the complainer, and adding a word of praise on the intelligence and lucidity of the complaining letter. So far he had made a total of some six hundred letter-writing allies that way. Complainants were usually loquacious, interfering types who expressed more than their share of public opinion, and many would glorify him to everyone whose ear they could hold, if only to have it known that they were on pally terms with a Director of the great UT.

Many of the letters were merely friendly and chatty, telling of money troubles, successes and family affairs. To these he recorded a few friendly remarks on wire spool, telling the same joke to each, and slipped each loop of wire into an envelope

to be mailed.

Pierce, studying a transport routing map, looked over and grinned at the sixth repetition of the joke, and Bryce grinned back and continued on recording a letter to an address in the Ozarks. "Got a young cousin of mine in from Montehedo, Miss Furnald, he's sitting here watching to see how a big business office operates and he's grinning at me because it looks like I want to just sit and talk at my friends all day long. I have fifty-nine business letters here to answer—honest to God—fifty-nine, I just counted them, so I guess I'll cut off and show the young squirt how I can work. Send me that photo of your sister's new baby."

He hung up the record mouthpiece. One more voter and loyal friend to pull for him when he was a public figure and the going got rough.

He grinned. It was a strange life and a strange game.

V

WHEN he left the office with Pierce, someone stepped out of a corner of the corridor and clutched at his sleeve, speaking rapidly. Bryce brushed off the hand carelessly and walked on.

"A junky," he remarked to Pierce. There was a quick flash of motion behind them that sent them whirling to one side. Pierce stood aside with the small needle gun in his palm waiting to see if it would be needed, while Bryce finished the downstroke of his hand that sent the knife and the junky reeling to the rubbery corridor flooring.

"Shall I report him?" Pierce asked, making his needle gun vanish in the same smooth motion it had appeared, and indicating a phone sign.

"No. It doesn't matter," Bryce walked on thoughtfully. "Everyone wants to kill me at once."

Pierce said, "It's easy to sway a miserable man to the point of pinning all his troubles and hate on to one name, like Bryce Carter."

"I know," said Bryce. He saw that the smiling dark young man was alert, walking a little ahead of him and glancing quickly left and right as they approached corners and intersections and recessed doorways where a man could wait unseen, doing his

job as a bodyguard efficiently and inconspicuously. "If it's the man I think it is," Bryce told him, falling into step again after they passed the turn into the tube trains, "he's working against a deadline. It's now or never. There won't be any more of this after next month."

Pierce answered after a glance at a passing mirror to see if they were followed, and a quick scan of the train platform. "Your usual haunts will be booby trapped. Better stay out of routine."

That night, in the spacehands end of the city, they ate the dinner that he usually had with Mona at a nightclub, or alone looking for a good pickup in an expensive cocktail lounge. It was in the shipping area around the docks, at the opposite end of the city from his usual haunts. The ceiling was low and the glasses shivered and danced with the constant muted thunder of jets that shuddered through the floor from the nearby landing fields.

His new assistant and bodyguard was pleasantly deferential, lighting cigarettes for him, listening respectfully to his opinions, drawing him out with questions that showed he understood what he was listening to.

Bryce could not remember having had such a good time talking since he left the company of the meteorite miners at the Belt. Everything he said seemed right and even brilliant. As he talked and told anecdotes of his life and sketched some of his plans he saw his past life with peculiar vividness as if he were a stranger seeing it for the first time. In the reflected light of the interest and enthusiasm of his audience, events took on a new glow of entertainment and adventure and success where they had seemed to be just work and risk and routine at the time.

They had an evening to pass. Somehow Pierce got into conversation with a little Egyptian who could have stood for Cyrano and had the same merry impetuous way about him. Raz Anna was his name. He claimed to be the Caliph of Baghdad, still incognito, or perhaps a professional explorer disguised as a native. After a few drinks he enlisted them, somewhat confusedly, as the two missing musketeers and they found themselves wandering arm in arm from bar to bar and up and down dark alleys interviewing the heathen natives.

Bryce realized that he was laughing steadily and enjoying himself in a way that had nothing to do with the small number of drinks he had had.

He couldn't get any deference out of Raz. Raz wouldn't have deferred to God himself, and it was no use trying to impress him, for nothing impressed him. Apparently the hook-nosed, merry little man had no ambition and no envy of anyone, and wanted no better of life than he had at the moment.

It was a strange new world they led Bryce through—Not the ragged, starving, crowded viciousness of his childhood—not the fighting equality of spacemen and rock miners, many of them wanted by the law—not the simple barren hospitality of the settlers in the Belt who owed him money, and who invited him to their sparse dinners in gratitude—Those he had always managed to keep in their places and exact a certain measure of respect.

Even the smooth powerful men of wealth around him now accorded him a certain measure of deference that was an acknowledgement of strength. But the two musketeers he was with and the world they opened for him seemed to respect neither distance nor politeness, nor hold any fear for strength. Friendly insults, and uncritical friendliness mingled oddly with the mock-solemn pretense of the fairy tale, and that part was genuine and spontaneous. It didn't seem to be a different kind of people he was meeting exactly: it was the same kind of people approached differently. He didn't know exactly how it was done, and he let the other two take the lead.

Perhaps he had drunk too much, he thought as he rode the hotel elevator. For in retrospect, the evening was a haze of pleasure that was hard to pin his attention to. Everything he had said, everything that had happened seemed profoundly right, an atmosphere which he had encountered rarely before and only then in the last stage of drunkenness. But he was sober. He had had only a few drinks, and his perceptions seemed sharpened rather than blurred. Yet, where there should have been critical thoughts and regrets for errors and restless plans in his mind, there was only a pleasant empty buzz.

"Too much talk," he thought, yawning

as he walked down the luxurious hotel corridor to his room.

IT WAS that night that he first noticed something wrong with the mirror.

He glanced into it casually while undressing, then not so casually, walking up to it and inspecting his face. A slight, unpleasant tingle coursed along his nerves.

A stranger— When he tried to focus on what was wrong he could find nothing that looked any different, yet the total effect was completely wrong. He decided that it must be the mirror, some subtle distortion of the reflection. The old one must have been broken in cleaning and a new one put in.

The chill passed and still the good blank feeling lasted. He went to bed reviewing the evening and smiling, and went to sleep without resorting to the mental arithmetic that he generally used to clear his mind of dissatisfactions.

The next morning the mirror still looked peculiar. There seemed to be nothing wrong with the reflected image of the room, but when he gave himself the usual inspection before stepping out into the corridor the feeling of strangeness returned and his eyes felt as if they were blurring.

He put his hand up to his eyes instinctively and felt a distinct shock when the mirrored image did the same.

Odd.

A slender smiling young man joined him in the lobby, rising and falling into step with him as he passed, going through doors before him with the inconspicuous alertness and precaution. He did his duties as a bodyguard well, Bryce noted, but that was only to be expected. Efficiency is, and should be, unnoticeable.

One thing he discovered during the working morning at the office. There had been nothing wrong with the mirror in his hotel room. The washroom mirror was worse!

He stood for a while, frozen in midstep, while he looked at a lean tanned and freckled face which looked like a color movie of his, every feature in its proper place as he remembered it, but yet not his. It didn't belong to him. He made faces at it, and it made faces back as if it were his, while he tried to believe that he was looking out of the gray eyes which looked back at him, then he heard someone coming in and left

suddenly and sheepishly.

That afternoon, after Pierce got into the swing of the work, he began to be useful, fitting himself into the work routine as though he had always been part of it, making the right calls and contacts and appointments on the barest hints, handing him the phone intuitively as he needed it, always at the right time with almost telepathic instinct. While checking over the decisions and plans of Kesby and the staff that needed his okay, and signing typed letters Bryce talked the thoughts and plans which came half formed to mind, almost thinking aloud. And when his remarks struck something that sounded like it would be good to do soon, he saw Pierce jotting them down, later detailing the preliminary steps for Bryce's use.

And too, all the small tasks were being taken from him with easy naturalness, saving him much time. His assistant was being what he had claimed he would be, a genuinely useful left hand. Bryce found himself proud of the kid's manifest efficiency, for he was a product of the same school that Bryce himself had climbed from.

On the way back to the hotel, after work, he caught Pierce glancing at him with a thoughtful expression, and realized that he had been faltering and giving a second glance to every public mirror that he had passed. He was momentarily embarrassed, wondering if any strain had showed on his expression.

There was a party he had to go to that night so he changed to formal clothes and stepped off again for the home of the FN Administrative Governor of the Moon.

He did not want to attend. It would be another of those stiff, lonesome dinners he had suffered through before, but he had to learn to make friends on his own social level, and be easy and convivial with the kind of people he would be associating with the rest of his life.

After the first hour had given him a good test, Bryce decided that the evening was as bad as he had anticipated. He stood on the outskirts of a small group, holding a drink and watching resentfully as a startlingly beautiful woman laughed and talked with the others of the group and not with him. She had been introduced to him as Sheila Wesley. The jokes she had with the others

were quick and subtle flashes of wit and insight, and seemed to be based on a mutual understanding that he could not share, even though some of the others had just been introduced and had been strangers to each other a few minutes back; it was something he grasped vaguely as a common background and approach to life that they shared, perhaps through education.

There were quick references to political situations they all seemed familiar with, or a name that could have been some character in a book they might all have read, or could have been somebody in history, each reference followed by a subdued laugh and an added witty statement from some other quarter. No one of them gave a word to him or noticed that he was there.

Why should they? He was dressed well and expensively, but so were they all. He was a person of prominence and power, but so were they all, and bored by it. He could not talk like the others. Then what could he do to make Sheila Wesley smile at him the way she smiled down at the ridiculous little fat man beside her as he excitably stuttered out his opinions.

SHEILA WESLEY was not like Mona, to be captured by money and clothes and influence. Would she be impressed even by the power he would have later? He tried to picture her as tremulous and awed, hanging on his words and flattering him, but he couldn't believe it. She probably wouldn't notice him any more than now. There was nothing he could do to impress her. He had thought Mona had poise, but now he saw that her manner was just an inadequate carbon copy of a completely spontaneous original. The woman, Sheila, managed to be poised, aloof, and yet friendly to everyone, simultaneously warm and unattainable.

He desired to be bitingly rude. That, at least, would make her admit that he existed. She was smiling at that ridiculous little fat man again.

He drained his glass and, completely unnoticed, left the party. Nobody would miss him, he was sure.

Outside in the corridor, Roy Pierce, his assistant, was engaged in conversation with two young men and two girls.

"There he is now," he heard Pierce say.

And one of the young men came toward him laughing.

"Is it true that this lunatic cannot go and make up with the lady of his heart because she has had him banned? If we all try to smuggle him in—"

And one of the girls, a really gorgeous blonde, called, "He was just telling us about that time you were in space with the pirates after you and they had stolen the big focusing mirror from the first Belt foundry furnace. I'm sure you can tell it better—you tell it."

He was surrounded by the five then. "Go ahead," they were urging, laughing, "Go ahead!" "It didn't really happen did it?"

This accusation was made by the pretty blonde. He looked at her half indignantly. "I don't know how he tells it but it happened." And he began to tell what had happened.

The two girls and the two young men listened, adding occasional startled interjections and admiring laughter.

Pierce inserted an occasional question and Bryce became aware that in answering them he was guided to stress and amplify points that made clearer the danger and comedy. Later he became aware that he was half consciously following the clues of Pierce's expression for the right stress and mood of the telling, now off-hand and smiling in telling what he had done, now heavily dramatic mimicking and burlesquing the tones and threats of the outlaws, now ironic and bitterly indifferent in passing over damage and deaths—as a wryly lifted eyebrow in the dark young face listening, and a faint imperceptible shrug made him see what had happened from a different angle than he had seen it then. Pierce apparently had something he needed, a good story sense. Following him must be something he had learned unconsciously last night, but it worked. He could see how well it worked in the expressions of his audience.

Someone leaving the party had stopped to listen, standing behind his right shoulder. When he finished, amid the exclamations and sighs of his listeners a cool, familiar voice drawled.

"That's quite a story. I picked up something about that at the new foundry on reef five, but it was already an old yarn then." She stood before him, still smooth and

poised and lovely, offering her hand. "I'm glad to hear it from the horse's mouth. Aren't you Bryce Carter? We were introduced in there, I think, but the name didn't click."

It was Sheila Wesley.

That evening was something to remember.

First they were a private party at a nightclub, then at a small restaurant. Tom, Betty, who was the pretty blonde, Ralph and the pretty brunette whose name was Marsha, Pierce, himself and Sheila. The talk ranged wildly over a multitude of subjects, breaking sometimes into collective fantasies of nonsense like a hat full of fireworks that left them laughing helplessly, sometimes shifting to philosophy and mutual confidences. Every so often Pierce brought the subject around to something that struck home to Bryce and he found himself holding forth with unexpected passion and eloquence, and he was surprised to see that the others were keenly interested.

Pierce rarely said more than an occasional cheerful remark, but in the more subtle plays of conversation Bryce found himself still half consciously consulting the cues of his expression to find what his own reaction should be, to find the right word and the right attitude that pleased the table and urged them all on to greater and more fantastic heights of talk. It was obvious that Pierce never had any difficulty understanding anyone. He had an instinct that Bryce lacked, and Bryce willingly surrendered to superior skill and followed his silent lead.

Sheila he discovered, besides being a member of one of the top diplomatic families, had worked for a short while as a consultant at the Belt plastic manufactory when it was being set up, and had taken to space life. She shared his enthusiasm about the future of the Asteroid Belts.

It was an unprecedented evening. At the close of it he had four new friends, and had discovered that "Tom" was Thomas Mayer-nick, one of the attorneys of the Spaceways Commission, and one of the men whom he had gone to the dinner to meet.

And Sheila, tall and slender and beautiful, pressed his hand as the group parted, and said in her wonderful voice, "I want to see you again Bryce," she smiled. "I eat at the technicians' end of town, you know.

I'll be with a Group at Geiger's Counter, tomorrow lunch. If you bear the company of slide rule artists we'd be glad to see you any time."

He stood for a moment, oddly surprised.

"Say thank you to the lady." Pierce smiled. And to Sheila, "You shouldn't startle people like that, Ma'm. His heart's weak."

"I just dropped dead," Bryce said, finding words. "You aren't leading me on? You'll be there?"

"On my honor," she smiled. "Good night, Bryce." She was used to such tributes. Half mocking as they were, she knew how much they were basically sincere, and accepted their tribute to her beauty as a matter of course. What a wife to have and introduce as his wife to other men, and see the look in their eyes.

He remembered suddenly that he had not once mentioned that he was a Director of UT. Somehow the conversation had never been led to a subject where he could have said it. He made a mental note to tell her next time. It seemed strange that he had been with five people so many hours without informing them that he was a Director of UT. He had done the same thing last night, now he remembered. But they had seemed to like him without it.

He let himself into his hotel room and turned on the light, but the first sidewise glimpse of himself in the mirror was disturbing. He solved that problem by the remarkably simple expedient of turning the light out again, and undressed in the dark, grinning foolishly.

VI

APPROACHING the scientists' and technicians' row along the subsurface arcades, the expensive restaurants grew fewer and were replaced by German-type beer halls, schools with courses advertised in their posted schedules whose titles were completely unintelligible to him, and second hand bookstalls selling battered technical books and journals whose titles were undecipherable in any tongue Bryce could think of. The lunch hour crowds were beginning to pour out into the arcades from elevators and tube trains in a rush to get first place in their favorite eating places.

Pierce half turned as if his eyes caught on the expression of a face behind them.

"Carter! There you are, you bastard!" The voice came from behind him, thick with rage, but more than that was the insult. It meant challenge. This was nothing in which Pierce could defend him!

Bryce wheeled, left hand automatically plucking out his magnomatic, wondering if the attacker would be the honorable kind of duelist who would hold fire long enough for him to get his gun out.

Miraculously it seemed to be happening. He already had his sights halfway on to the speaker when he recognized him, a gross heavy figure he had seen a hundred times. Mr. Beldman of the Board of Directors. What was he doing on the Moon?

Beldman stood with his fists on his hips and his legs spraddled, sneering at Bryce. "That's right," he said, heavily sarcastic, "start shootin' when you're surrounded by innocent spectators; when you know I can't draw on you. That's the way of a crook." The husky base voice echoed from the walls. Behind him to the bend of the corridor people were scattering hastily out of the firing line.

Crook was the central word. Somehow Beldman had found out that Bryce was responsible for the corruption of UT, and he was dealing with the matter in the most direct way that it could be dealt with, for a death in a private duel would be laid to a quarrel and not investigated.

How had he found out? Bryce forced down the question as he stiffly reholstered his magnomatic. There was no use thinking of that until the question of surviving the next five minutes was settled. He stood with his hands empty, feeling curiously empty inside, oddly missing the white rage and love of murder that usually carried him through such things.

It seemed too good a day to spoil. He would rather have continued his way to lunch with Sheila, and let the man live—or let himself live. This would be no duel for a little bloodletting. Beldman's purpose was to kill. And Beldman himself, knowing what he knew, had to die. "Do you understand what you have said, sir?" Bryce used the formal words of the dueling countries.

"You're damn well right I do!"

"Are you prepared to take the conse-

quences, sir?"

"More ready than you are," Beldman said, his hands still on his hips. He amplified his remark with a few well chosen words that harked back to his truck driving days.

"How many shots?" Bryce asked more softly, beginning to want to kill.

"Until one of us is down with his gun out of his hand."

Bryce repeated the provision to the crowd that had drawn up discreetly along the sidelines. "We fire until one of us is both down and disarmed."

There was a murmur of surprise among the crowd for that was an unusual and deadly provision for a formal duel. As Bryce paced backward the required number of paces, counting aloud, two men volunteered as seconds. They came forward to compare the guns rapidly and show them to the duelists. It had to be done and finished rapidly, for lunch hour had begun with its flood of people into the corridors, and they were holding up traffic.

Bryce's gun was a .42 magnomatic, working on an electrical acceleration of the slug by electromagnetic rings in the thick barrel. It was soundless except for a legal built-in radio yelp that announced its firing and number to the police emergency receivers. Beldman's gun was another maggy of the same make but heavier with a wide-mouthed barrel apparently throwing a much heavier caliber slug.

"Ready?" The second stepped back to the edge of the crowd and began counting off half a minute by seconds.

The faces of the crowd faded from his consciousness. Bryce stood with his hands empty at his sides as the seconds were counted. "Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven," came the voice, counting evenly and loudly. The world narrowed to a corridor of space with the blocky figure of Beldman at one end and himself at the other. Funny, Bryce thought, that he had never considered that bull-headed impatience and strength as dangerous. He was a massive block of a man; where Bryce was thick with muscle, J. H. Beldman was so wide in shoulder and barrel and so thick in arm that he looked almost round. Like Bryce he had worked up from the bottom, Bryce remembered, starting as a truck driver

and labor organizer, and then owning his own line and giving UT a stiff battle before being bought out. Crude, but that didn't mean that there wasn't a lightning brain behind that round face.

"Twenty-six, twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three—"

He had underestimated the deadliness of the man. Beldman was obviously subject to rages, and in the grip of one now, and if he had survived all the duels and battles that his rages had brought long enough to grow as old as he was then his age was an indication not of weakness, but of the degree of his deadliness. The irritable thought came that he might well be killed by this ox.

"Twenty-two, twenty-one, twenty, nineteen—"

He flexed his fingers restlessly, and felt in his mind the speed and sureness of his draw and firing. That big blocky figure was just another obstacle standing in his way, to be blasted aside. A loud mouth to be shut.

"Ten, nine—" He concentrated on the counting. "—six, five, four—" sureness growing like a coiled spring in every muscle. "—three—" He crouched slightly. That blocky figure that was all the rest of the world was no more than a target. A big target.

"Two—one—fire."

Something confusing happened. As the word came it seemed that a gigantic blow hit him somewhere on his left shoulder, twisting him around so he couldn't see his target. He spun back, willing himself to shoot again quickly, but his legs buckled oddly as he turned. He reeled, finding his balance with great effort.

Heavy slug, he thought, seeing as delayed memory the coiled spring speed with which Beldman had moved. Bryce's left arm did not seem to have any connection with his mind. Glancing down briefly he saw that it dangled.

BUT the maggy was still there, held in the numb, unfeeling hand, pointed limply at the ground.

He wondered if he had fired it yet.

"Drop it and fall down," advised Pierce's clear voice from somewhere.

There was a stirring and whisper from the blur of the crowd who stood watch-

ing to see that the rules were observed. Beldman was walking towards him.

"Do you end the duel?" asked someone, probably the second.

"No," the blur of Beldman answered and suddenly he came into focus, walking up, his wide mouthed gun unwavering in his hand. Bryce remembered the provisions of the duel. Fire until one is down and weaponless. There was nothing said about remaining at a fixed distance. Beldman intended to walk up close enough to shoot him between the eyes. It was too late to let himself fall and end the duel. Beldman would fire if he saw Bryce begin to fall now. He was already close enough for a sure head shot.

Feeling was returning to his left arm. It dangled abnormally far and probably looked broken and useless, but there was nothing actually wrong with it, only something in his shoulder was broken. After the first cold numbness of impact, sensation returned tingling in his fingers, and pain was beginning to burn in his shoulder. Bryce waited a few more seconds, feeling the control returning to his fingers, not changing the glazed off focus of his eyes. How many duels had Beldman won like this? The impact of one of those heavy slugs hitting bone was a dazing blow, enough to stun some men, and he probably counted on that effect.

The square figure lumbered closer, a lumpish clumsy caricature of the self-made man, brutally strong, unashamedly misfit to the society of the smooth-wise, smiling, easy mannered people that he and Bryce had joined; a model of everything that Bryce was trying to destroy in himself.

With a quick twist of the wrist Bryce swung his palm flat up flipping the magnomatic muzzle into line with it and put a bullet into the round face.

In that position of his hand the back kick of the shot twisted his arm back in its broken shoulder and pulled the maggy from his hand, but it didn't matter. The duel was over.

The motionless crowd dissolved again into talking individuals going to lunch.

Pierce picked up the maggy and made the usual query of those who chose to remain.

"Which of you has any complaint of

unfairness or advantage taken by either party of this duel?"

Most of them were leaving, anticipating the arrival of the police with their time-consuming questions, but twenty or so crowded close around Bryce and the corpse. "Press a thumb on your shoulder subclavian, man," someone advised Bryce. "You're bleeding like a faucet."

Pierce's clear voice said the standard words over the murmur and shuffle of feet. "No unfairness having been observed, when called to give testimony you can then say that he shot in self-defense and under duress."

A low wail of sirens was heard.

"WHO was that character?" Pierce asked later, sitting beside the table while a surgeon patiently pieced together the three or four shattered pieces of Bryce's collarbone and fastened them with ingenious plastic bolts.

Bryce absently watched the process in a large tilted mirror slung overhead. Medicine bored him. "J. H. Beldman, member of the Board of Directors," he explained, and for the benefit of the policeman standing beside the door he added, "Bad tempered as they come." He looked into the mirror uneasily, trying to focus on his face.

His clothes were being cleaned of blood and dried somewhere. When the doctor had finished sewing and patching Bryce showered and dressed in a small dressing room beside the emergency ward, where he found his clothes hanging neatly in a drying closet.

As he finished a man in plain clothes entered and dismissed the cop with a word, and handed Bryce a printed notice and his magnomatic. "You're clear," he said, leaving again with a friendly half salute. "No charges." The police had already recorded the testimony of the witnesses and inspected the weapons used. It had been a fair duel and the survivor was clear with a standard case for self-defense. The printed notice called him to testify at the coroner's inquest into the death of J. H. Beldman during the next Saturday, but there would be no charges and no investigation.

There would be no trouble from Beldman, but who else knew what he had known, that Bryce Carter was responsible

for the corruption of UT? How had he learned it? If someone else knew, there was going to be trouble.

Coming out of the emergency ward, he checked his watch.

One-fifteen. Too late to find Sheila Wesley still at Geiger's Counter. But he knew he could see her another day—and with a good story to explain why he had not turned up the first time.

They ate at the nearest stand and went back to work. Trying to write was almost impossible, and even using his left hand for minor tasks was difficult. In spite of the quick healing of muscle and flesh from the amino and nucleic acid powders the doctor had packed in, the shoulder ached with a tightness that spoiled his coordination. He shifted to writing clumsily with his right hand.

After twenty minutes he abandoned the pretense of working and began thoughtfully doing practice draws with his right hand. It was stiff and clumsy, and there was no holster in his right pocket to make grasping easy. The second time the maggy caught on his pocket edge and slipped from his hand he left it on the rug where it had fallen, sitting looking at it thoughtfully for a moment. Today was the day he would meet Orillo.

"How well can you handle a four tube cabin cruiser?"

"Line of sight only. I'm no navigator," Pierce responded.

Bryce said soberly, realizing what he had decided, "This is a good day to have a bodyguard who's a good shot. I have an appointment to meet a friend—and I'm not sure he's a friend."

"I shoot," Pierce said, writing at one of the letters he had been set to. "Happy to oblige. Shall I wear my bulletproof clothes?"

"You could do with something like that," Bryce said soberly.

Pierce looked up from the letters. "Would this be the man behind all these bullets, and you're meeting him in space?"

"Yes."

"In armor plated tanks with heavy artillery?"

"No."

"No light and heavy cruisers. No machines?"

"Just you." Bryce was smiling at Pierce's mock astonishment. He knew that the kid didn't care in the slightest where Bryce led him as long as there was a fight at the end of it, and he left it to Bryce to choose the odds.

The odds might be even enough. Orillo himself, if he came with murder as his intention, would bring no helpers for witnesses, and he would expect Bryce to bring none. Or if he had hired assassins, he would not come himself, and they would not know who had hired them, but they would have been told to expect one man only.

THE secrecy of any meeting in space is practically absolute. If there is one thing which space has plenty of, it's distance—distance enough to lose things in, distance enough to hide in, distance enough so that even if you know where something is by all the figures of its coordinates, if it's smaller than a planet you can't find it even when you are there. To put it crudely, what space has is space. And finding something that doesn't want to be found in space is like looking for a missing germ in the Atlantic.

He had the coordinates of the beacon he had chosen for his appointment point and the robot pilot took him to that area with automatic precision. But once there he had to cruise manually back and forth three times through the perpendicular plane of Earth's equator before picking up the radar pip of the buoy, which was set to broadcast its presence by a circular sweep of radar pulses on a flat plane corresponding to the Earth equatorial average.

He found it no later than expected, which was over an hour early, on the principle that he who arrives first finds no ambush.

He left Pierce with certain instructions and floated from the ship to the familiar globe that spun so placidly on the anchoring rod that attached it to the controlling buoy. The buoy was powered strongly enough to have controlled the orbits of fifty such globes without strain. Buoys of that type were just beginning to be popular in the Belt.

Once inside he opened his faceplate, looking around with the same pleasure he

always felt on his visits here. It was like being back at the Belt for a time. After the raw harshness of the moon and the artificial luxuries of its cities, after the agoraphobic vastness of Earth's giant surface, to be within this little close-knit familiar world was soothing and relaxing. It was a green glade of leaves and branches, greenness underfoot and overhead, a brown metal cliff with vines and a door to his left, a larger brown metal cliff like the round head of a barrel with doors in it to his right, and a circular silver door in the center. Behind the small right hand cliff was the small amount of regulating machinery required, behind the doors of the larger cliff was a small kitchen, and convertible study-bedrooms. Behind the silver door was a corridor leading to the airlock and space. It was forty feet from cliff to cliff, and from the growing greenery underfoot to the growing greenery overhead, as spacious as a wide glade in the woods of Earth.

He picked his way among the vines and shrubs to a carpetlike patch of green moss and sat down comfortably to wait. Pierce had drawn the ship off beyond detector range by now, and it would seem to any ship approaching that he had not yet arrived.

It was peaceful there, no breeze stirred the leaves. Twenty feet above, fixed in the air on clear spokes of lucite, the crystal globe that was the sun for this small world gave forth its warming flood of light, sunlight borrowed from the sunlight outside and led in on the lucite spokes.

He had an interest in its manufacture, and had anchored his globe here as a commercial sample of a spaceglobe for the viewing of likely settlers. It was slightly better and more compact, since it was a newer model, contained in an ovoid hull that was only forty-six by sixty-six feet, but in essence it was like any of the farms and homes of the astroid belt, and there was nothing like it on any planet in the universe.

VII

BEHIND the silver door a bell rang suddenly. A spaceship was approaching.

It was still early. They would see the globe alone and assume that Bryce had not yet arrived. The spaceship itself might be

armed illegally, but those within would not blast the globe without checking its interior. Bryce glanced up at the silver door in the cliff and arranged his position so as to be lounging on one elbow, with his gun hand lying relaxed under a thin curtain of leaves. The magnomatic was pointing up towards the corridor door.

There were a few tall bushes between the base of the cliff and himself, but the silver central door was five feet up a flight of steps and in clear view.

Four flights of steps radiated away from the circular door to the hull, like spokes from an axle, all of them leading "down" to the inside surface of the globe. As he waited he heard the faint clang of magnetic soles hitting the metal of the airlock, and then the door chimes that announced that the airlock was being used. Someone was coming in.

He could follow their actions in his mind, timing them. Now they would be floating in the vestibule, facing a circular wall with a door, the wall spinning silently and rapidly, and the door in its center turning slowly end over end. The door marked the axis of rotation. There was a turning bar with handles running through the center of the airlock. They would float up to that and grip it to pick up spin, until the vestibule seemed to be rotating around them and only the circular wall and the central door seemed to be steady. Beyond it would be the corridor, and then the silver door.

The door in the cliff dilated silently. Two spacesuited men stood in it.

It was incredible that he had let them come in without seeing the door open. In the first split second he saw that neither of them was Orillo. In the second instant he saw that no weapons were visible, but that one stood slightly behind the other and his right arm was hidden.

They had happened to come to the entrance at an angle to his orientation, almost at right angles, and they would be confused for a moment, before they identified his shape, for to their orientation if they used Earth-thought for it, he would seem to be leaning head downward on an almost vertical slope. He took advantage of the lag to move his gun under its curtain of leaves and get the sights lined on them.

They swung their eyes around the circle and saw him. "Mister Carter?" asked the foremost one. Their faceplates were still closed, and their voices slightly distorted by transmission through the helmet speaker, but he could hear a note of surprise. As the first one spoke the second one moved his hidden arm slightly, as if he were holding something.

Bryce did not tighten his finger on the trigger. These could be mere innocent sight-seers. The position of his head, almost upside down relative to theirs, was probably confusing them, though almost certainly they had studied trimensional photographs of him. At any rate they probably were aware that they were standing like targets in the corridor doorway and would be in no mood to postpone action.

"Take off your helmets, gentlemen, make yourselves at home." It was a partial admission that he was the man they wanted, but not certain enough for a decision. He saw the shoulder-twitch that meant that the second one's hidden hand jerked in a moment of uncertainty, and he thought he saw something glitter under the first one's arm—the old trick of shooting from under a friend's screening arm. . . .

"Mr. Bryce Carter?" the foremost one was asking again.

Bryce smiled. "No, Pierce," he said. He had turned on the two-way speaker and tuned it to the ship as he came in.

Immediately the voice came in the corridor behind them. "Stand still. You're covered."

There was no chance that anyone could genuinely be behind them, but the rear one whirled and snapped a startled shot into the darkened corridor, and the other leaped sideways down from the doorway, drawing his gun with blurred speed, and leveling on Bryce as his feet left contact with the sill. He was falling slowly, almost floating, and it should have been an easy shot, except for something he had obviously forgotten, or he never would have leaped.

Bryce disregarded him as a danger, and threw three shots at the other, who still stood startled and off balance in the corridor, firing three with his inexperienced right hand to make sure of placing even one. The figure dropped out of sight in the corridor.

IN THE flick of time that Bryce's eyes had been away from the falling one, the path of the man's leap had begun to curve strangely, until now he seemed to be floating in a curve, flying sidewise and upward, faster and faster as he approached the hull. The rule of conservation of momentum was having its way. To the man's dizzied eyes, as he tried to keep Bryce within his sights long enough to fire, it must have seemed that the ground began inexplicably to turn and slide by, that suddenly the whole shell was turning around him like a big wheel, carrying his target up the wall and over his head.

He was almost to the sliding ground when a bush caught at his feet and yanked them from under him with a crackling of branches, and the bottom tread of a flight of stairs swung at his head like a gigantic club. Among the sudden splintering of branches and snapping of vines was a crunching thud which sounded final.

To anyone within a globe, it did not ordinarily appear to be spinning, the only sign it was, was the comfortable pseudo-gravity for anyone standing on hull level. But to those who approached the ground from the lighter G corridor, the stairs were necessary—stairs whose treads were oddly dipped in the middle in a shallow U. By bracing against one side of the U coming down, and on the other going up, one invisibly picked up enough speed to match the speed of the ground level. Jumping was the equivalent of jumping out of a moving car at forty feet a second, the sixteen feet a second, half of the corridor plus an extra thirty feet a second spin, the side slip speed of an eighteen foot drop where it had looked like five.

It was probably these added extra distances in the air, Bryce decided, that sometimes made the bird flights look so bewilderingly variable in speed and direction. He had not thought before how difficult it would be to plot a straight course from one side of the globe to the other.

He waited for a sign of motion, his magnomatic ready, looking up at the gunman lying overhead, forty feet away on the other side of the globe. The limp figure was unmoving, it looked badly tangled in vines, and its gun was gone. There was no need to shoot, but he wondered suddenly, if he

had, what kind of a curve would the bullet have followed?

There was no sound from the other, but Bryce hesitated to climb the stairs and put his head above floor level of the corridor. A voice might give the other direction for a snap shot if that was what he was waiting for. Bryce chanced speaking.

"I've got this one, Pierce. How's the other?"

The televiewer in the entrance hall replied, "Lying on his back with his gun five feet away. You all right?"

"Yes." Bryce walked around the circumference of the globe and searched in the vines for the missing weapon of number one. The body in the spacesuit nearby was quite definitely a corpse. He saw the gun glittering a little further on and picked it up, wiping off leaf pulp on a clean patch of moss. It was a heavy duty police pacifier, a distance stunner, adjusted to a narrow beam.

He climbed to the corridor and collected the other weapon. It was a police pacifier too. They had not meant direct murder then, but only to stun him and deliver him to Orillo, C. O. D.

"How are you doing with their ship?" Bryce asked, "Is it armed?" Armament for spaceships was illegal, and careful official inspection made it rare.

"I didn't wait to see," Pierce's voice came apologetically after a pause in which some background noise sounding like a crash came over the televiewer speaker. "It started swinging around when I came in sight, so I just rammed it with that pretty ornamental nose spike. I'm backing off now with the forward braking jets."

"Then whoever's inside is probably either spacefrozen or cooked. Jockey that ship around on the spike and give her a four minute shove toward Earth, then push that button that collapses the ornamental vanes on the spike and let it pull loose when you start braking. I don't want any ship hulks floating around here."

"Aye-aye, Cap."

"Go slow on those braking jets when you pull loose. The back wash could touch your hull."

Pierce returned and came in to help Bryce drag the corpses through the airlock and into space.

They braced against the silver curve of

the floating spaceship and gave the body a combined strong shove towards Earth. Spinning slowly end over end it dwindled into a dark speck against the glowing orb of Earth, destined to be a meteorite and make a small bright streak in the Earth sky several days later.

*When the tubes conk out, the fuel runs down,
The cold creeps in to where I lie.*

Pierce was reciting as they went back into the globe for the second corpse.

*I'll take the meteor's trail—go home to Earth
And make a Viking's funeral in the sky.*

"This is too easy," Bryce complained as they watched the second corpse fade from sight. "The trouble is, in space all corpses are delicti. It's an incentive. Launch your enemies."

"Gauch country did all right under that system," Pierce said somberly, "and so did the American frontier." He floated motionless, a spacesuited figure turned toward the gray-green misted globe of Earth that shone against the black star-sprinkled sky as if he could have reached out and touched it. The sun caught the planet on its day hemisphere and reflected brilliantly from a shadowy blue glaze of water that was the Mediterranean, turning half of it to white fire.

Bryce's earphones picked up Pierce's voice again. "Frontier-born nations always look back and say that the first years were the best."

The words caught at something Bryce had felt before. He looked at Earth hanging splendidly in space. It was beautiful and he was fond of it, but—He said, "I don't think we'll ever go back." Nor would mankind itself. Never again—through all conquests from this point in time—would mankind go back down into the mesh of gravity to be a thin film over the surface of a planet.

"Give old Earth a smile, Bryce, we've hatched."

For a moment longer Bryce hung, watching Earth turning below. The management of UT was down there. He'd be damned if he'd let them get away with thinking they could tell him what to do, or think the Belt

where a line should be extended and a colony planted. The belt was his country, not theirs. Space belonged to the people who lived in it.

"No taxation without representation," Pierce said irrelevantly, as if he had been reading Bryce's thoughts. They jetted back to the ship and into the spacelock.

"Frontier country—" Bryce said as he stepped into the cubical of the revolving door. Gently tightening elastic bands drew him into position within the man-shaped mold. "What's a frontier on your terms, Roy?" When he was in place the other half of the rubbery, air-excluding mold closed on him and the airtight cylinder rotated, delivering him into the interior of the ship. He pushed the button impatiently to have it revolve back for Pierce, but it remained obstinately open, its servo refusing to close on a mold full of air and rotate air back for release into space.

Bryce remembered then. This was something he didn't have to bother with when he flew alone, for when going in or out he was always in the door when it rotated; it never turned empty. Beside the door on a hook hung an inflated pressure suit, complete with gloves, boots and helmet. Except for the absence of any sign of a head or face inside the dark translucence of the helmet it looked like a full-sized man. Bryce reached it down and placed it in the mold, and watched grinning as the mold closed and the door rotated, delivering the man-form to an equivalent hook in the spacelock. The doll was known by all spacemen as Hector Dimwitty, and every ship had one or two. There were a thousand yarns and jokes circulating about the adventures of the Hectors, most of them lewd, and a few of them true.

Pierce's answer was in his earphones, "A frontier is where people go when they are young, broke, or have the cops after them."

"Right. Suppose I stake the broke, and loan them transport, and offer the fugitives unregistered safety to receive mail and to buy supplies?"

"You do that?" Pierce stepped out of the door and they took off their helmets.

"Yes, when I am my own man, not working for UT."

"If you do that, you bring in ten times as many of the broke who wanted to settle

there, and—"Pierce took a long jump in understanding, saying softly, "They're dependent on you. Handcuffed to you and praying for your health and prosperity as long as you hold their loans and secrets, for with your death or bankruptcy, another man might come to your books to read the records of your loans, and demand payment, and give the secrets to the police or keep them for his blackmail. But to do it is to take a risk of murder or arrest, and a high cost in hard work and money. Why do you want to do this? What payment do you take?"

"They pay by being my men, grateful and ready to back me up when I want help later. They don't have to be grateful, for they know I can call any loan if the owner crosses me, and I've built a reputation for an occasional fit of irrational temper that is threat enough for anyone to avoid crossing me, without feeling that I have wanted to threaten or force them. As for the fugitives they pay enough by wanting the Belt to be organized as a nation independent of Earth, so that the hand of the law can't stretch out and drag them back, and they can become wealthy in open business, in the million chances for wealth that lie around them in the Belt. They don't know that they want this yet, but they will see it when it is told to them. I can't do any of this now—it's suspended for as long as I am part of UT and have to drag the dead weight of ten Earth-tied conservatives with me in every decision."

VIII

HE STOPPED to set in the coordinates of the Moon for the robot pilot, but he found himself still wanting to talk. "Man has reached space—do you think he'll ever go back to the ground? In space he has gravity only when he wants it, and any weight of gravity he likes, depending on how fast he spins his house. And no gravity when he wants that. You see what that means to engineers in the advantage of building things? No weight in transportation, no weight in travel, limitless speed and almost no cost as long as he stays away from planet pulls. His house is in the sky, and when he steps out of it he can fly like a bird. And food. To grow food there is

sunlight Earth never dreamed of. For heat and power there is sunlight to focus. Space is flooded with heat, irradiated with power—

"It's not child's play taming it, and those on the ground don't see it yet. But the next step of mankind is out into space, and it's never coming back."

Pierce, sitting in one of the shock tank armchairs, asked, "What part do you have in this?"

Bryce looked at him with a feeling almost of surprise, as if he had been called back from a long distance. "Me?" he laughed, a little awed by the immensity of the goal, and the ease of it . . . "First President of the Belt and political boss for life. That's enough."

Enough to hold the solar system in the palm of his hand, if he chose. He who rules space, rules the planets. It was the first time he had ever mentioned his goal to anyone.

Roy Pierce asked, "What do I do about this 'friend' of yours who lays traps?"

The last attack had settled the question of who was behind the other attacks, and who had told Beldman, but Orillo would still be a useful pawn. All that was necessary was to evade his attempts at murder for a month or so until partnership tied them too close for murder.

Bryce explained some of that to Pierce, setting up a chess board to pass away the time until they arrived back at Moonbase City.

"What's my next assignment?" Pierce asked, when they were several moves into the game.

Bryce recalled a danger he had made no move to guard against. "The Board hired a psychologist, a mind hunter, to find out who's doing the undermining. He's one of the Manoba group. Remember the name, look it up and find out what their methods are, how to recognize them, and report back what to do about it."

"I'll take care of him," Roy Pierce said absently, moving his knight to threaten Bryce's bishop.

"No unnecessary trouble. Remember I have to keep my name clean." Bryce moved a pawn one step to cover the bishop and leave room for his other bishop to menace the knight.

"I'll be careful. There'll be no publicity.

He won't get hurt," Pierce said, moving the knight into Bryce's second line where it threatened the king and a cornered castle. "Check." And he added, as if apologizing for having delayed his move, "I don't like to move until I'm sure what's going on."

The remark didn't seem to be suited to the game, as if he had referred to something else.

IT WAS during dinner on the Moon that he and Pierce loosened up for the first time since the ambush. Pierce had been comparatively silent since the chess game on the trip back and Bryce too, whether in sympathy with him or in a naturally parallel mood, had little to say. But now the tension had diffused and, with the stimulus of aromatic food, they climbed out of their depression of emotional solemnity.

The decorations of the dining room were lush. While they ate, the materialism of their lives was reinforced. From silvered-and-tapestried wall to wall there was life here, low-keyed with excitement in the blend of subdued talk and the shifting artistry of lights and music. Their table was almost in the center of the islands of tables and potted trees, and around them were the diners, their voices washing up at them both, inviting them with gentle tugs to surrender their resistance, beckoning them into the sea of simple pleasures.

"We owe ourselves some fun, Bryce."

At Pierce's words, Bryce sharpened his eyes on the face across the table. There was a touch of seriousness in those words; more like a statement than a suggestion.

Pierce smiled wryly and took a vial out of his pocket and poured it into his drink. He spun the empty bottle between thumb and fingers.

"We owe ourselves some fun," Pierce repeated. "We've nothing on the fire tonight, nothing to do that's crucial. It's a good night to experiment."

The warm voice waves lapping at Bryce's mind suddenly receded and left a chill. With instinctive wariness he thought of hypnotics and single-shot addicts.

Pierce couldn't have missed the emotionless freeze on the other's face. Still twirling the vial casually, he began to explain. It was a new drug, he said, found being used

by a tribe in Central Africa. "I've heard of it for some time and what you mentioned a little while back reminded me of it."

Bryce caught the hidden reference. Central Africa—and the Manoba group. So Pierce had not dismissed the mind hunter from his thoughts as a problem to be easily dealt with.

"It's still in the testing stage," Pierce added. "But some of it is circulating among medical students. The tests have interesting effects. And, as I say, tonight's a good night to experiment. It's called B'nyab i'io."

The chill in Bryce's head and spine was thawing out. "You're not conning me?" He said it with a grin, but there was an edge to the question which demanded an answer.

Pierce gave it to him, for a brief moment deadly serious. "You couldn't get addicted if you swam in it."

Bryce believed him. He stared at the glass. "What does it do to the I.Q.? We've got to collect some information here and there this evening. I want to be able to read and talk." He smiled crookedly. "No worse than usual, that is."

"Either raises the I.Q. or leaves it alone."

"What's the effect?"

"It affects different people different ways. After hearing the reports I'd like to see how it hits us." Pierce pushed it towards him, grinning. "Leave half for me."

Bryce's wary thoughts touched poison and immunity and murder, but inwardly he began to scoff at his own habits of suspicion. However, before he could reach for the glass, Pierce had given a short snort as though in recognition of his presumptuousness and drank his own share first.

Then Bryce raised the cold glass to his lips.

As he put it down he could feel the change beginning to spread through his blood, warming and relaxing, bringing closer the memories of pleasure and good times. The restaurant was now completely seductive, with the surf of voices pleasant in his ears, calling to him to join the world and its offers of uncomplicated pleasures. He felt himself blending with the ethereal background mixture of light and sound.

"I like this," he decided.

"We should take notes." Pierce was smiling as he stuffed the empty vial back

in his pocket.

THE next day Bryce looked back on that evening with pleasure. Everyone had been remarkably pleasant, friendly and considerate, and Pierce had always had the right friendly word and gesture to reward them, speaking for Bryce, knowing his way around the cities of the Moon to the right places for the information they sought, always speaking for Bryce Carter, his employer, getting him the things he wanted, giving the orders he wanted to give before Bryce had even fully realized that he wanted them. Bryce had needed to say nothing the whole time except "Right. That's it," and everything went as he wanted it.

"A perfect left hand man," he smiled, stretching, and turned the polarization dial to let in the sunlight.

The telephone rang. He picked it up and the desk clerk said in a deferentially hushed voice, "Eight o'clock, Mister Carter."

For some reason the hushed voice struck him as funny. "Thanks, I'm up." He hung up and stretched again. It was soothing to have someone solicitous that he arose on time, if only a hotel. The hotel had given him a lot of good service. He felt suddenly grateful for all the pleasures and luxuries and small services they surrounded him with. It was a good place. He was feeling good that morning. Maybe because the sun was so bright . . .

He liked the look of the people passing in the lobby as Pierce joined him, and he liked the look of the passengers in the tube trains on the way to the office. They all looked more friendly. And as he pushed through the second glass door into his offices he liked the clean shine of the glass and the rich blended colors and soft rugs and gray textured desks and the soft efficient hum of work in progress.

Bryce usually passed Kesby's office with a businesslike nod, but Pierce smiled in, stopping for an instant with Bryce. "Good morning, Kesby. We're glad to see you." It was true enough and expressed what he felt.

Bryce exchanged a grin with Kesby at the boy's insolence and then went on into his office.

It was a good day.

It was a good day for what he had to do.

In the luxury of his inner office he sank

into the deepest, softest chair, letting his cousin-from-Montehedo sort the mail, agreeing with the boy's suggestions for action or sometimes issuing his own instructions, keeping only half his mind on the routine day's business, relying on Pierce, and concentrating the other half on the deed to be done. The plan was set in his mind but he had changes to make.

He was barely conscious of the time slipping by as he lay, rarely moving, in his chair, while Pierce worked at top speed.

By one o'clock the deck was cleared for action.

Bryce stood up, stretched, and checked his watch again. It was 1304 hours. A telephone call was scheduled in about another hour, and five more successively about a half hour apart.

"Order us some lunch, Pierce, before I lift the drawbridge."

The food came in as he was instructing his staff to leave them undisturbed for the rest of the afternoon.

By the time they had finished eating, their isolation was complete. The office was a command post now, with only the slender, unattended telephone wires connecting them with the outside worlds.

Bryce moved over behind his desk. He drew the telephone toward him and dialed a number. Somewhere, in the locked safe, the phone rang.

From the case he took a toy dial phone. Pierce's eyes were on it, his eyebrows lifted quizzically, but Bryce offered no explanation. The boy was due for a series of surprises. And when it was over, he would know everything without any explanations, and too late to interfere.

"Hi Al," Bryce said to the recorded "Yeah?" at the other end. He dialed a number on the toy dial, the one receiver against the other's back. After the usual ritual, Bryce said, "Hello George, how's everything going?"

This is it, Bryce thought. This was the first part of the final blow to UT. And the only instrument he needed in his delightfully simple method was a telephone. Originally he had planned six brief warning calls to the six key numbers of the ground organization. He would tell them to refuse to take anything from the hands of the UT branch, and break contact with them imme-

diately after accepting cash for miscellaneous items. That would set the stage.

The police trap would close on all members of the UT branch of the organization while they were encumbered with a maximum of incriminating objects to dispose of in too little time. Then would come his anonymous tip to the police. He'd inform them that certain employees of UT in a few listed cities would be found to be smuggling in large quantities of drugs. The thing would be so simple. And the whole works would blow up with the efficiency of the calculated explosion of nuclear reaction.

That had been his original plan.

But things would be different now. The morning in the easy chair had changed his approach. The newer, more elaborate program, still remarkably simple, would bring down the whole structure within UT without the help of the police, but by himself alone, planning it, initiating it, executing it with no one's help. Not even Pierce's.

He heard himself saying:

"This is 'Hello George.' Listen to me and don't interrupt.

"Somebody has talked. I've been betrayed myself. Get that? Hello George is washed up. Right now the cops are tapping this line. It doesn't make any difference to me, now. But it does to you. This is an open warning from Hello George to you. Spread the word. I'll keep making calls until they break in on me and cut this line.

"Meanwhile, spread the word. Break connections with me and the whole organization. Get out of range before the trap closes. But pass on this warning first.

"I'll hold out against questioning a short time. The police will get me eventually, of course. And when they do they'll pump me dry. They'll get names and addresses. The whole works will get grabbed, unless you move fast. Spread the word."

Bryce paused and winked at Pierce who was standing at his elbow. "Any questions? Yes, I'm sure. Of course I'm sure. Any other questions? Good luck, Okay."

He hung up.

As Caesar once said, the dice were rolling.

Pierce, beside him through it all, simply stood there, his eyes wide and his face sharp with curiosity and incredulity, his body twitching now and then from the in-

fection of the excitement which rippled over the room. That excitement had been there, though Bryce had not permitted himself to indulge in it in any visible way. He had showed Pierce a new facet to his operations, one which Pierce could not anticipate immediately, one in which only he, Bryce, could make the snap decisions and evaluate the immediate responses demanded of him.

That was with the first call.

WITH the second one Pierce began to contribute, rising to the occasion as he had so often and quickly done in the past. He began pacing up and down between calls, smoking furiously and laughing under his breath.

"Tell 'em the police are breaking down the door," he suggested during the third call. "Say you're hypnoed to hold out against questioning five days at the most, two hours more likely."

His suggestions were a howl. Bryce repeated them into the phone with counterfeited desperation and was rewarded by the sounds of panic at the other end. He and Pierce chortled over the frantic queries and exclamations from the victim. The whole thing, succinct and pointed and with the dramatic power of simplicity, was one super practical joke which would set the entire solar system scurrying around for the next few weeks.

The ramifications would be endless. Persons would vanish abruptly and take up new names and identities in the obscure countries, others would draw out their heavy savings and take the first rocket out from Earth. There would be a new influx of refugees to the Belt, new settlers to be honest farmers and factory workers and repair men.

Yes, the situation was dramatic.

The day was a good day.

But as Bryce hung up on the last call, a depressing sense of calamity, unsettlingly anti-climactic, began to press down on him. Pierce was talking about plans for the next week with an enthusiasm which should have been completely contagious.

But there was something wrong. There was something wrong.

What was it?

Bryce felt Pierce's enthusiasm catch at him and start to sweep him away. He

savored the pleased glow produced by the shattering changes he had managed to cram into one day. With six telephone calls he had broken the drug ring completely and forever, broken it so completely that no member of it would ever have dealings with any member of it again. All of them were out of business, fleeing with the imaginary hounds of the law baying at their heels.

He smiled at the thought.

And then his smile faded for some strange reason and he ceased listening to Pierce for a moment, looked away and ceased listening, for hearing Pierce just then distracted oddly from the clarity of his thinking. He wanted to review what he had just done.

What was wrong?

What?

He struggled with a mounting confusion, the desk top and telephones blurring as he tried to concentrate with desperate effort.

Unexpectedly the question sprang into focus. It was as if the room turned inside out, the day turned upside down.

He had smashed himself—not UT!

Why?

Why had he made those calls—changed his plans—and made those calls?

With the most perfect and terrible clarity he saw the results of what he had done. The organization destroyed. The contacts he had made fifteen years ago as an anonymous young dock hand, contacts that as Bryce Carter he could never make again—vanishing—merging with the great mass of the public—becoming gray unknown figures. The building of years melting like a sugar castle melts into the tide—the invisible army that had obeyed his sourceless voice without being able to blackmail or rebel, the perfectly balanced tool in his hands that could be used for the bribing of venal politicians, with a limitless fund for the bribery, the growing secret control of the most venal of the political machines of Earth, that by the time he needed it it would have been an irresistible weapon in his hand for the single swift political blow that would rip the Belt from Earth control, and give it a seat on the Assembly of the Federated Nations, and mastery of the solar system—

But as he sat there the organization dissolved.

He grasped the phone, but there was nobody to call now, no one would answer. He could never reach them again.

This was sanity now, but what had it been before when he was cheerfully destroying his future? It seemed to him that there were two halves to his brain, each wanting different things. For a moment the one that had controlled the day was gone, and he was sane again, but how long would that moment last? What sign had there been when it took control? Would he know it when it came again.

He remembered that in the tube train that morning he and Pierce had had a half joking argument about the best short-and-merry life. One of the happy ones on the list had been the INC agent, because they spent so much of their lives working into smuggling gangs that they had all the pleasures and profits of being a crook and an honest man too. Was that where he had slipped his cog?

Looking back on the things he had done that day he saw that much of it had fitted an abstract pattern of justice, as if he had been thinking of himself as an INC man. Or as if—

He thought of the things he had seen in his childhood that they had called zombies, and jeered at and tormented without fear of any retaliation or vengeance from their gray-faced victims. Imprisoned men—they looked normal—but they had been mentally imprisoned. Law-zombies, memorizing and following laws and being honest with a simple and terrifying literalness.

He had not known that he had any capacity for terror.

Bryce Carter. He had his name, his identity and his memory, and they were his own. Sometimes he had had nothing else, only the pride and strength of knowing his identity, that it was his and stronger than others, just as his hands were stronger, a thing they couldn't take from him.

Could they? There was a nightmare he had had more than once, that he remembered suddenly for the first time, with all its atmosphere of childish strangeness. The cop psychos were after him. He was trapped in a big room with lights and they had his head open and were chasing him around inside his head somehow, trying to catch him, and kill him, the him that lived in his

mind.

Would he know if it was gone?

The black sharp-edged shadows of the crater walls were drawing across the landing plain outside, bringing to a close the four weeks of daylight, and the reflected sunlight was dimming in the room. He could hear the rumble of a heavy ship of a cargo fleet lowering in to a landing.

His assistant was sitting quietly on the edge of the desk as he had been for some time, motionlessly watching the thin plume of smoke that rose from a cigarette in his hand. He was as still as if he were listening for some subtle sound far away. Rocket jets flashed an orange glow through the venetian blinds and fell in stripes of orange light across the dark young face. The brief rumble of a rocket take-off came, transmitted through the ground and the building. Smoke curling up from the cigarette was the only motion.

"Roy, is Pierce your real name?"

The light flashed and faded in bars of orange across the young face he had thought was like his own, the boy he had thought had come from Pop Yak. The quick deep rumble of sound came and faded in the walls around them. A fleeting smile touched the face, and the dark eyes rested on his for a moment as Roy Pierce gave the information casually as if it were any other information, answering the question that had been meant. "It is my mother's name. We always take our mother's names. I am a Manoba—a Manoba of Jaracho."

IX

LOOKING into Bryce's face he slid to his feet slowly, ground out the stub of his cigarette and stood before the desk.

Bryce took out his gun and held it where Pierce could see it. "Are Manobas ever shot?" It was a heavy little gun, his maggy, its barrel sleek and rounded, the heavy metal warm from being worn close to the skin.

"Sometimes. It's a natural enough reaction."

It was a spaceworthy gun with adjustable velocity for driving through padded suits and pressure suits. The velocity was set high, but it would be inartistic to blow a large hole through a psychotherapist. Bryce turned the dial down slowly, watching him.

"Do the professional ethics of privacy and non-publicity cover this kind of situation?"

Pierce was smiling slightly with a touch of bitter humor. "It's undiplomatic to tell you that, but yes, the contingency is covered. There is nothing to connect myself with you as a case in any records, nor anything to identify me as a member of the Manoba group contracted by your company. The ethic of privacy is allowed to have no exceptions for the family's record."

A cool curiosity held him. "Tell me—when you saw that I was beginning to think, why didn't you just needle me down for a short nap and leave?"

The smile remained. "I am supposed to control the shock of realization, and make sure that it is assimilated without damage to the subject." His dark expressionless eyes met Bryce's, and Bryce felt the impact of them, and realized for the first time that there was the same slight bitter offhand smile on his own lips, and inwardly the quiet ironical mood with the still clarity of a deep pool. His own mood? He hefted the gun in his hand, feeling its weight and balance. "You could have done that over the televiewer," he pointed out dispassionately. "What is the average mortality, do you know?"

"Not high. It is only inexperience that is dangerous. If one can get through one's first three or four cases, it's safe enough."

Looking back over the past days it was quite clear that Pierce had control over his emotions. Any emotion Pierce chose him to feel he would feel. It remained to be seen how much that could influence what he was going to do. The dark-skinned young man stood before the desk casually and answered questions with a slight restrained smile that set the wry irony of both their minds.

A man does what he wants. That is freedom, but what he wanted could be controlled apparently. A man *is* what he wants. But what he wanted could be changed. How easy had it been to change him. Bryce tried himself with a thought of the power and glory of rule, the reign and mastery of space—a goal that had warmed his thoughts for many years.

He didn't want it.

There was a numbness where there

should have been emotion, and all he could feel for his loss was the resignation and the faint bitter humor permitted him by Pierce's smile. Watching that smile he shifted the heavy little gun in his hand, turning it over casually, feeling its familiar weight and the texture of its surfaces.

He spoke gently. "If you don't mind my asking, have you passed through your first three cases yet?"

"You are my first," said Roy Pierce, whom he had trusted. "I'm afraid I was clumsy."

"Oh—you did all right." Bryce shot him then, placing the bullet carefully in the pit of his stomach where it would hurt. That was for doing well. For justice. No man has the right to meddle in another man's mind.

Pierce had been starting to speak. He swayed back a half step with a flicker of change crossing his face then stood steady and smiling again. That brief grimace touched Bryce's nerves with a sensation that was like the jangle of something heavy dropped inside a piano, a sound he had heard once. But the numbness did not lift from his feelings. He was still smiling. The third bullet would be between the eyes.

The words were low and rapid but clear.

Bryce did not listen. "This is for doing a good job," he said, overriding the other voice with his own, and pulled the trigger again, placing the slug slightly lower this time, in the belly, where if it entangled in one of the spinal plexis it could hurt past belief. Pierce swayed slightly. His face went to the clay-blue color that comes to dark-skinned races when they pale. Bleeding inside somewhere, and already dead unless he were given help, Bryce figured.

For a moment Bryce saw something like effort in the dark unreadable eyes. Then suddenly Pierce smiled, his young face disarmingly innocent and merry. "Oh, come on, Bryce, it's not that serious. Be a good sport. You don't want to—"

Suddenly Bryce saw the situation as the sheerest humor, a sort of lunatic farce for the laughter of some cosmic joker. He swung the gunsights up towards the smiling face. Amusement bubbled in his blood and he heard himself laugh—heard it with a grim secondary amusement.

"The joke's on you," he said, and pulled

the trigger, then laughed again. The joke was on him.

He had missed. He had missed at a distance of three feet. Yet his hand was rock-steady. Pierce's control had him. His laughter stopped as the humor in Pierce's attitude faded down again to the small wry smile that had been there from the beginning.

Bryce had not lost. He had only to wait a little and he had won. Unless Pierce could use his control to force him to call help. He set himself to resist and not to listen. There was not long to go. The expressionless dark eyes that held his were beginning to widen slightly in an effort of sight that meant that a private darkness was closing in on the psychotherapist. The rumble of distant rockets seemed louder, covering his fading voice. "It's your choice, Bryce. I give it to you. You won't want this later—Bryce—but don't—hunger to undo. It is payment enough for all—times like this—that you change—and do not—want—them any—again—" Pierce pulled in a strangling breath, swaying more visibly. "Gun," he whispered, reaching out in Bryce's direction, his eyes going sightless.

Bryce handed him the magnomatic, and watched as Pierce fumbled his hands over it, putting his prints on it blindly, his knees bending.

When he fell, Bryce picked up the phone and called Emergency. The emergency squad would be cruising around in the halls somewhere nearby, looking for the source of the three radio notes that had told them that a gun was fired.

"THAT was the last I saw of him," the young man stopped talking and looked pleased with himself.

Donahue drained his drink irritably and put it on the bar that had been set up on the ceiling when the Gs went off. It clung magnetically. "Make it the same, please." He turned to Roy Pierce, floating beside him. "Stop needling me, man, finish the story. The way you tell it, I don't know what you did, how you did it, or even whether you died or not."

"Oh, I died," said Roy Pierce. "But they revived me," he added.

"Good! I'm glad to hear that!" said Donahue more cheerfully, wondering suddenly

just how extensively he was being kidded. "For a moment there you had me worried. Now explain about this treatment."

"It's called soul eating," explained the dark-skinned, straight-haired boy, "I don't think you could do it."

Donahue thought that information over carefully. "Maybe not. How's it done?"

"In the tribes of my people the soul is supposed to be an invisible double who walks at your side, protecting you and speaking silently to your mind. Its face is the face that looks out of mirrors and up from pools at you, and the shadow that walks on the ground beside you. Evildoers, after they had spoken to a Manoba, would say that their reflections were gone. Our family was called The Eaters of Souls, and all the tribes were afraid of us for nine hundred miles around."

"So am I," said Donahue compactly. "As my Yiddish grandmother on my mother's side would say, it sounds from were-wolves."

"I can explain it."

"No magic?"

"Look," said the youth tersely, "Do I want to get kicked out of the FNMA? What if I had sat in a jungle circle loaded to the ears with herbs and spells, with the drums of my cousins throbbing around me, and learned the best and subtlest ways of my technique back in time looking through the eyes of my great grandfather, or conversing with his ghost. Do you think I would say so?"

"No," Donahue admitted. He edged away a little.

The youth spoke gloomily. "Rapport and intensified empathy is something you learn by exposing yourself to mirrors. The technique is published, known and accepted among psychologists, but most of them just don't try. It backfires too easily, and it takes too high a level of skill. It originated with my family." The youth spoke even more gloomily. "What I do is obvious enough if I make it so. It's simply prior mimicry. I watch the trend of what goes on in his thoughts, and express approximately what he is feeling and thinking a little before he does. So that presently, subconsciously he is depending on me to tell him what he thinks and how he feels.

"I was his mirror, his prior mirror. I am

a clear, expressive underplaying actor as an actor, and each shade of reaction is separate and unmistakable. The subconscious is not rational, but it generalizes from regularities that the conscious mind never has the subtlety to notice. It saw me consistently representing its own internal reactions, hour after hour in every situation more clearly than Bryce ever saw himself express anything in a mirror, and more steadily than he ever saw any mirror. The subconscious then associated the inside emotion with the corresponding outside image for each one. I became Bryce's subconscious self image. When he thinks of doing anything, the image in the imagination that does it is not himself, it is me. This can cause considerable mental confusion."

"It should!" Donahue agreed fervently.

"I put him in new places and situations where he was unsure and I was sure, so that when I diverged from mirroring him, he gave me the lead and mirrored me. One of us had to be the originator and the other the reflection, but now it was reversed. He did not fight it subconsciously because the results were pleasant. I kept the lead and led him a mental dance through thoughts and reactions he had never had before, in a personality pattern completely foreign to his own, one that I wanted him to have. I hadn't been hired for that, but I had time to pass before I could untangle that UT problem, and I wanted to do it for him. The mirror link was complete the first day, but I'm afraid the extra days made it indelible. He'll always be me in his mind, and mirrors will never look right to him."

"IT'S SO simple, it's obvious," said Donahue with disappointment. "It doesn't sound like magic to me."

The youth was thoughtful, frowning. "Sometimes it doesn't to me either. I wonder if the ghost of my grandfather was telling me the right—"

"Forget the ghost of your grandfather." Donahue interrupted hastily. On his few space trips he could never get used to this business of floating eerily around in the air, and it seemed a poor time to talk about ghosts. "What about Bryce Carter. What became of him? You know," he said defiantly, "I like his plans for organizing the Belt and breaking UT. And, come to think

of it, if I had been there when you were interfering with *that*, I think I would have shot you myself."

"UT had only hired me to find the organizer of the smuggling ring and persuade him to disband his organization in UT. I had done that. So the third day, when I could walk, I left the hospital and went back to Earth, and collected my fee for a job done. Many people had vanished suddenly from their payrolls, and the crime statistics in some cities had shown a startling lull. They knew I had done it, and so they paid and were grateful." The dark youth shrugged. "I didn't feel I had to tell them about Orillo. He tipped the police and started a rumor, and there was evidence enough in the crime statistics of the months before, when they were correlated with the distribution of branches of Union Transport, though there was nothing to point at anyone in particular except the ones who had disappeared."

Donahue remembered. "Sure that's that investigation of transportation monopolies that raised such a stink last year. I saw part of it in Congress."

Pierce handed him a travel folder. Gaudily illustrated, it advertised the advantages of the C&O lines for space tourists. "Carter and Orillo."

Donahue looked up, puzzled. "But this is the next step in what he planned. I thought you changed him."

"Mahatma Gandhi would have followed out those plans," Pierce said with a touch of grimness. "As you pointed out, they are attractive. But I changed him. I won't give you personality dynamics, but if you want a list of changes—He's married to Sheila Wesley, that's one change. And instead of going home nights he rosters around in bars and restaurants, talking to everybody, listening to everybody, liking them all and enthusiastically making friends in carload

lots. That's another change. He doesn't look into mirrors because they make him feel cross-eyed. That's because he unconsciously expects to see me in the mirror. And he will organize the Belt and be president as he planned. I won't stop him in that. The difference will be that he won't want the power he'll get." Pierce said grimly, "A power-lusting man can never be trusted with power: he goes megalomaniacal. Carter was already halfway there. But he's safe from that now. He's going to be given plenty of power, and see it only as responsibility, and not want it. That's the only safe kind of man to have in a powerful position."

"That—" said Donahue with great earnestness. "—is like sending a poor damned soul to Kismet paradise as a eunuch. You psychologists are all complete sadists," he said lifting his drink. "I suppose you've put something in my drink?"

"Absolutely nothing," Roy Pierce assured him, grinning. "Funny thing was, when I got back to Earth that time, I kept feeling cross-eyed when I looked into a mirror. And my friends said I was not myself. If I was not myself, I knew I must still be Bryce Carter. Things had seemed different, and they had warned me that the technique sometimes backfired when I was learning. So I called my uncle Mordand on the televiewer—he's the head of the family, and he lives in an estate in the jungle—and he—"

Donahue was fascinated again.

There was a different approach for each case, Pierce had found. It was not ordinarily ethical to discuss any case history, but he knew with great surety that Donahue could be trusted not to repeat what he was being told. The only reason there wasn't something extra in his current drink was because there had been something in the last drink.

This was case five.

The WEALTH OF ECHINDUL

By NOEL LOOMIS

Though he carried with him the loot of the ages, who in The Pass—that legalized city of vice and corruption—would dare risk his neck to help Russell, the Hard Luck Man of the Swamps?

HE CAME up out of the Great Sea-Swamp of Venus like old Father Neptune. He was covered with mud and slime. Seaweed hung from his cheap diving-suit. Brine dripped from his arms that hung limp and weary; it ran from his torso and made a dark trail in the sand.

Without even looking back, he stood for a moment as if fighting to keep on his feet, while the brine made a small puddle in the green sand. Finally he unscrewed the helmet and took it off. He turned around slowly



A flash of intuition hit Russell. He knew now how to win this fight.

and looked back across the two hundred miles of deadly swamp, at the flaming craters of the Red Lava Range from which he had come.

With fingers that would hardly function from weariness he took off his diving-suit and straightened up. His stooping shoulders were free of that weight for the first time in forty days. He was a small man, hardly over four feet tall, and not well formed. It seemed incredible that he had crossed the Great Sea-Swamp on foot.

And as he looked back at the distant rim of green fire that marked the mountains it seemed incredible to him too. A great sigh of relief and gratefulness shook his unsymmetrical body, and all the nerve and colossal will-power that had carried him for six months, suddenly flowed out of him in a single wave and left him empty. He forgot about the ordeal that still lay ahead. He forgot everything. He pitched forward on his face in the sand, and slept.

Some hours later a whistling noise awoke him. He rolled over, awake instantly, for in past months his ears had saved his life as often as had his eyes. High in the sky he picked out a cannibal fish from the Acid Sea. It had set its great wings in a dive.

He raised his heat-gun, fired once, saw the feathers burst into blue flame, saw it falling; then he rolled over and went back to sleep. Not even the thud of its heavy body on the sand disturbed him, but an hour later he heard another warning—a rasping sound—and through the stench of the ancient swamp he smelled a fetidness that meant danger.

This time as he turned he rolled to his feet. He saw the huge coils of the Venusian water-constrictor. One lidless phosphorescent eye gleamed evilly at him, but its great jaws were spread and the dead fish was half-way down its bone-plated throat.

Grant Russell relaxed. Ordinarily he would have been scared to death to be within miles of the big saurian. But now for a few hours, with the fish in its throat it would be comparatively harmless.

Grant rubbed his eyes and stretched. How wonderful sleep could be! For six weeks he had been in the swamp where he never had dared to take off his diving-suit even when he was resting on a clump of floating grass, for fear it would suddenly sink and drop

him into a hundred feet of brown water; six weeks walking through mud sometimes over his head, with the brown, infested water above that; six weeks pitting all his swamp lore against sudden death in a thousand forms, with only the light gravity of Venus to aid him, and his indomitable determination to keep him going. But now he felt like a million.

No man had ever crossed the Great Swamp alone on foot before. Few had crossed it in any fashion. Few would have tried it but Grant Russell because few wanted to do it as much as he did. In spite of his small size and his scrawny muscles, in spite of Venus which catered to big men and strong men, he had done it.

THE food problem alone would have stopped most men, but Grant had spent a lot of time around the swamps of Venus. Often he had gone prospecting with food enough for only one week because he couldn't buy more, and he had stayed four, five, six weeks.

To do that he had had to experiment. He'd eaten all sorts of things. Sometimes he had been ill but he had acquired immunity to certain poisonous plants that contained food values.

The oxygen problem for a diving-suit for forty days would have stopped most men but Grant had solved that too. If he had not, he never could have gone to the Red Lava Range after the fabulous gizzard-stones of Venus's prehistoric echindul.

For oxygen, he had discovered a plant that grew in the bottom of the swamp. You could cut its stalk into sections and put them in a container and they would exude oxygen for several hours. But he had to carry at least one extra stalk all the time, and he had to keep his eyes sharp for more. Sometimes it had been close.

Grant looked at the Red Lava Range and felt the precious leather bag inside his shirt and smiled. Yes, he'd done it. He'd found one of the fabulous nests of the echindul—and it had been loaded with stones, just as ancient Venusian legend insisted.

The extinct echindul had been a sort of flying lizard that had nested in the mysterious, almost inaccessible Red Lava Range. Every echindul had had two gizzard-stones, and each matched pair of stones had an un-

usual property.

Grant reached in his watch-pocket and brought out the one he had kept out of the bag. He held it up and watched the sunlight, filtering through Venus's thick clouds, and the firelight, reflected from Red Lava Range two hundred miles away, play on the chatoyant interior of the stone as if they were chasing each other.

Those stones would be worth forty thousand Earth dollars a pair if he could get them to a reputable dealer in Aphrodite, Venus's largest city. Therein lay Grant Russell's next problem, and in spite of the satisfaction he felt at emerging from the Great Swamp, he knew that getting safely to Aphrodite might be an even more serious problem.

Aphrodite's only approach over the Lead Vapor Mountains from the southern hemisphere was through The Pass, a legalized city of vice. On one side The Pass was flanked by the Bubbling Zinc Pits and on the other side it was skirted by the Fluoride River, and man had not yet devised any way to navigate either of these. It was doubtful, even, that any species native to Venus could cross those two areas, but on this authorities did not agree for in the year 2542 Venus and its natives were still largely unknown.

Not so far unknown, however, that Grant Russell failed to recognize the single luminous eye that had risen out of the water on a long, slender stalk. "A fish," he thought, or as some would have said, a Venusian. It saw that he was looking at it, and it dropped out of sight. There was the swirl of brown water that marked its under-surface progress. It swam like a fish, but it wasn't really a fish. It was one of Venus's four dominant species and the most "human" of all.

The swirl moved fast across the surface of the water and disappeared in the direction of Aphrodite but Grant knew that its place would be taken within a few minutes by another. And if Grant had had any forlorn hope that he might be able to slip through The Pass, he gave it up, for he knew now that his movements were reported hourly and that his possession of the fabulous stones was undoubtedly known to Relegar, the Uranian.

Relegar was the master of The Pass.

He was no human and he had no human feelings. Killings and stealing were a business to him, and he had the most efficient spying system on any planet. It was well known unofficially that he kept an underground factory busy extracting a drug from the stamen of the swamp-orchid. The drug was labeled "Venus-snow," and Relegar found it highly profitable to trade it to the fish in the Sea-Swamp on the southwest and to the semi-aquatic people in the great Gallium Bogs to the southeast—some called them "frogs"—for information.

Relegar's spy-system was a monopoly by reason of a peculiar fact: the fish-people talked in a high sound-range that no solar being but a Uranian could hear; no Uranian trusted another Uranian, and so Relegar was the only entity in The Pass who knew the dialect of the fish-people. Seldom did any person or any entity find anything of value in the bottom half of Venus that was not promptly reported to the Uranian.

Therefore Grant Russell did not dare enter The Pass with the stones on his person. This was a quick way to lose them—and perhaps his life. Some day, thought Grant wishfully, some big-shot would come along and clean out The Pass and then the little honest men would be safe. On the rare occasions when a prospector did find something of value and get back to land he would be allowed to keep it. Grant wished he had a lot of power or a lot of money. He'd take over the clean-up job. But a fellow like him, without friends, without influence, without money, didn't have a chance.

GRANT had thought about that a good many times on his long trip across the swamp, but he had worried more about how to dispose of his own stones before Relegar got hold of him. He would of course have to use deception. But how? If he could hide the stones some place he could go on into The Pass empty-handed and pretend that he'd had the usual lack of luck. Then he could see Netse, the Jovian fence, and make a deal for protection. He'd have to give up half, but that was the easiest way out, for Relegar would keep hands off if Netse got there first.

But where could he hide the stones? There was too much continual volcanic

subterranean activity in the swamp, and on what little dry land Venus had it was doubtful that any hiding-place could be called permanent. It might be solid today and swallowed by an earthquake tomorrow.

The only real solution was to have somebody else keep them for a while, Grant thought, and that was a discouraging thought, for whom could he trust in The Pass even if he could reach them? For that matter, who in The Pass would risk his life to help out Grant Russell, the Hard-Luck Man of the Swamp?

He'd been known as a hard-luck man as far back as he could remember. His parents had been killed in a rocket crash on a trip to Mars; he'd been raised by one relative after another and they'd each one gotten rid of him as soon as they could. Finally he had married a nice girl and they had been happy until their daughter was born. Then the mother had died.

Grant had gone to pieces for a while. When he came to, he was broke, hungry, ragged. Then when it was too late he had become frantic over the safety of his small daughter, Beth. He found that she was safe in a child welfare home in New Jersey, but they would not release her to him until he could pay what he owed for her care and have enough left over to establish himself as a substantial citizen.

He had told her goodbye. She was the image of her mother, and she had held onto his hand as long as she could and said between sobs, "Daddy, can we have a farm some day, and raise strawberries, and have just us two? I don't want to be an orphan." He had gulped and said, "Sure," and then he had come to Venus. It was a new planet, largely unexplored, full of opportunity.

That had been three years ago. Things had been tough at times but now he could afford to smile. He'd hit the jackpot—a million-year-old nest of the echindul, with sixteen pairs of stones. He put the one stone safely back in his watch-pocket. He was keeping that one. When he sold the others he would have the dealer pick out the mate to this one, and he and Beth would keep this pair. They would be well able to afford it.

He felt the bag at his side. The stones didn't weigh much, perhaps a couple of ounces apiece, but the famous telepathic

stones of Venus were well known on Earth. Wealthy young lovers would carry a pair, if they could get them, so that each could know what the other was thinking.

Scientists said the stones were matched crystals so that each pair, in effect, was tuned in together. They said also that the stones were little more than nature's ultimate extension of man's feeble attempts at radio communication.

Grant Russell knew little about that. What he did know was that those stones were worth half a million dollars. He gathered up his patched diving-suit and packed it, from long habit. He raised his head and saw another eye watching him from the swamp. He watched the eye and listened to the rasping of the bone-plates in the constrictor's throat.

Ordinarily he would have tried to kill the big saurian, for its skin had the property of turning slightly radioactive after death and it was worth a couple of hundred dollars delivered in Aphrodite, but a thought occurred to him. He watched the saurian and began to smile. The constrictor could be worth a lot more than two hundred dollars to him.

He flipped a handful of green sand at the eye in the swamp and it withdrew abruptly into the water. He ran, making a wide circle around the constrictor's powerful tail. He darted in to the head and stood above the lidless eye. Three years ago he would not have walked this close to a *dead* constrictor, but now—well, he'd learned not to be scared until there was need of it. He bent down. The fish was well inside the saurian's mouth. The constrictor's jaws were distended and it was helpless.

Grant whipped the bag of stones from inside of his jacket and tied the leather thong to one leg of the fish. He made sure he had the one single stone in his watch-pocket. That one he had to keep to be able to find the others. He went back to the edge of the swamp and waited until he saw an eye come up, whereupon he flipped another handful of sand at it.

He stayed there for two hours, until the bag of stones was well down the saurian's throat. Then he set out for The Pass. He was painfully hungry now, but he was light-hearted. Never again would he have to risk the death that infested the Great Sea-Swamp.

Within thirty days he would be home—home on Earth. He and Beth would get a little house out in the country and have a little garden, and he could relax and watch his daughter grow up. She was only seven now. It wasn't too late.

IT WAS dark when he got to The Pass, the sinister city where he'd seen men killed for a twenty-dollar bill, where girls had been sold over the counter for fifty. He knew better than to go directly to Netse, for the Jovian and the Uranian had a sort of throat-cutting partnership in the underworld, and while Grant was sure Netse would help him directly to get a bigger cut, he knew also that Netse wouldn't want to be too obvious about it.

So Grant, by this time weary in the shoulders from carrying his equipment, turned down Thorium Avenue toward Nellie's Boarding House. But under the first street-light he was stopped by a grimy boy. This was notable, because the boy was an Earthman. There weren't too many Earthmen in The Pass.

"Where you been, Hard-Luck Russell?" the boy asked insolently.

Grant's throat was dry. He knew what that meant. Nobody who knew Hard-Luck Russell would bother to stop him unless they had orders to do it—orders that came from Relegar.

"In the Swamp," Russell said, swallowing hard.

The kid stared at the diving-suit in Grant's hand, stared at Grant's face with a sharp, penetrating, unshamed inquisitiveness that made Grant use all of his will-power to stare back. The kid suddenly disappeared.

Grant forced himself not to walk faster. The kid had put the finger on him. It was the first time Relegar had ever done that. Those damned eyes! Relegar must know what Grant had found, and the knowledge that the Uranian knew about the stones made him weak. Relegar was a bad spider.

Grant's impulse was to run but he forced himself to be steady. Now he didn't dare go straight to Netse. He went on to Nellie's place and hammered on the door. "Oh, it's you. Come on in." Nellie opened the door. Nellie was a Martian, a century-plant, and nobody knew whether it was he or she or whether it made any difference, but they

called it "she" and they called it "Nellie."

Grant went in. Nellie's leaves rustled and that queer whispery voice came from her. "Do you want a cot?"

"I'll have a room this time," said Grant. "How much?"

"A buck," said Nellie's leaves. "Pay now."

She collected. He took his diving-suit to the room. He didn't like the smell of cabbage and garlic, and the fumes of chlorine were so strong he nearly choked. A Saturnian must be pickling insects somewhere up on the second floor. He sat down. He was starved but he didn't want to go outside until he had a chance to figure things out. He thought maybe the first thing to do was to see Netse.

From the sounds he thought the two girls across the hall were getting ready to go out. He lay down on the bed to rest.

At ten o'clock they left, jabbering. It was good to hear Earth-people talk, even if it was French, which he didn't understand. As soon as the front door closed after the girls he tiptoed across the hall and tried the door-knob. It was locked. He opened it with his skeleton key. The room was dark and he did not turn on a light. He opened the window and dropped softly to the ground in a narrow space between two buildings.

A grating voice said, "Where you going, punk?"

Grant froze. He wanted to run but couldn't. He turned. Back at the alley, in the light, was a medium-size, solidly built man with black hair and a long scar on his left cheek. Grant wheeled, but stopped short. In front of him, at the street end, was a huge Neptunian. It was ten feet high. Grant shuddered. He didn't want that thing too close to him with its razor-sharp teeth and its fondness for blood. He walked toward the Earthman.

THEY took him into a snow-joint over on Chloride Street. The man led, the Neptunian followed. They went down many flights of stairs carved in the solid purple lava and finally into an elevator. They went farther down.

This, then, was Relegar's headquarters. The Uranian couldn't stand radiation for any length of time. Out on Uranus they had almost none, and so Venus, with its very

heavy clouds that filtered the sunlight, was one of the few planets where a Uranian could live. Even so, the Uranians on Venus, having an instinctive dread of sunlight because sunlight usually meant radiation, preferred to stay underground. Perhaps it was more like their native world that way, for they lived underground even on Uranus.

They got out of the elevator in a rock cavern and walked a hundred feet. They passed two guards and went through a steel door. They were in a big room, dimly lighted by red bulbs. Grant didn't like the dimness and he didn't like the smell. He tried to see.

"Here he is," said the man.

There was an odd bass rumbling which Grant recognized as the voice of a Uranian. He shivered. Then there were words, and Grant knew the Uranian, wherever he was—maybe in a different room—was using a modifier to turn his sounds into Earth-language. "Walk closer," ordered the queer voice. "I want to watch your face."

It scraped the marrow in his bones, that queer voice. He saw a big tunnel, and at the far end of it, barely discernible in the dim light, was Relegar. Grant stared. His eyes became used to the queer light, and then he began to make out details. The tunnel was round and big enough so that a man could have walked into it, and at the far end the big Uranian seemed to be standing on his side, with his sixteen huge jointed legs supporting him, half of them on the floor and half on the ceiling. His purple, hairy body was supported in the middle almost as from a web. His two semi-globular eyes, seemingly opaque, were surrounded by six smaller ones. Grant knew the smaller ones could detect infra-red, and now he felt his face growing warm and knew they had an infra spot on him.

"What did you find in the swamp?" asked that dissonant voice.

Grant swallowed and licked his lips. "Nothing," he said finally.

The great maw of the spider, rimmed in red, opened wide as if the Uranian was yawning. It showed long, curving white fangs. Then Relegar said, "You found stones of the echindul."

"I have only one," said Grant, and held it out fearfully.

A curious red began to creep over Rele-

gar's body. His next words were deadly: "One is no good. You found many. What did you do with them?"

Grant watched the great, gray poison-mandibles lift, and he was terrified. He wanted to speak but he could not.

"You've hidden them somewhere," said the horrible voice. "You intended to go back after them. Well, I am going to let you do that. But I shall be after you. I, in person, shall be on your trail. How will you like that?"

"I—I haven't got them. I don't know where they are," Grant insisted, which, in a manner of speaking, was true.

Relegar's two big bulbous eyes seemed to grow bigger and bigger, but still the light was reflected only from their surface. Grant took a step backward. Relegar swayed his body toward him, but the legs did not move. "Go get your stones," he said. "But whenever you do, I'll be right behind you. And don't try to go to Aphrodite."

The lights went out. The giant Neptunian was at Grant's side. Grant felt the leathery skin against his hand. They took him up and kicked him out on the street.

Grant got dazedly to his feet. He had to see Netse the Jovian, quick. Netse would exact a steep price as soon as he found out that Relegar had threatened, but even one-third of the money would be better than nothing. And he knew what it meant to be trailed by Relegar. No being from any planet had ever come back sane from being hunted by Relegar. Most of them didn't come back.

He stopped at the big jewelry house over on Curium Avenue. He saw that it was now nearly one o'clock in the morning, and of course the jewelry store was closed, but he knew that Netse seldom slept and that the Jovian probably did more business at night than during the day. He pressed the night button and waited.

The square of sidewalk dropped. Grant walked between X-ray scanners and remembered to deposit his heat-gun. He was met by an Earthman who took him up a long escalator. They went into a well-lighted room hung with the rich tapestries and golden drapes. The man escorted Grant to a pedestal in the center of the room. The lights went out and it was inky black.

Then suddenly there sprang into sight on

the pedestal a transparent dome the size of a small goldfish bowl. It was lighted by ultraviolet from the bottom. In the center of the dome a small golden ball hung by a platinum wire, and on the ball was a tiny butterfly—Netse the Jovian. Netse's wings moved slowly as he walked around the ball, and the violet light brought out the delicate green luminous tracery in his wings. Grant involuntarily stepped back.

There were whistling words and Grant was aware that they came through a speaker and amplification system. He knew the dome that protected the Jovian was almost indestructible. "You wished to see me?" The wings moved slowly back and forth. Each one had a purple spot in the center like an eye.

Grant gulped. "Yes. I—I have something to show you. I need your help." He wondered if the purple spots actually were eyes.

"Most people do," said Netse dryly.

Grant, inordinately ill at ease, fumbled in his watch-pocket. It was incredible that this tiny butterfly that would hardly outweigh a cigarette paper should have the brain to conduct a ramified business such as this one, and it was even more incredible that men and everything else—except perhaps Relegar—would yield to its will. Will, of course, was the key factor. Will was dominant and men obeyed.

GRANT held out the echindul stone. "This is one of a pair," he said. "I found the other one too."

"You have just come back from the Red Lava Range," said the whistling voice. "How many pairs did you find?"

Grant stared at the butterfly. Some thought the Jovians could read minds. Grant wondered. Then he decided to be honest. "Sixteen."

Netse's wings quit moving for a minute. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to assure me safe passage to your office. I will give you three-fourths of them," Grant blurted. He had not meant to make an offer like that. He had intended to let Netse ask but the delicacy of his situation hit him abruptly and fully and he was weighed down with sudden desperation.

"How can you find the others?" asked Netse.

"I—" Grant got cautious. "I have pro-

vided for that."

The butterfly fluttered to the top of the dome and hung upside down for a moment. Then the whistling came again. "I am sorry. I do not see where I can be of any assistance."

Grant was stunned. He held out both hands. "But—"

The lights went out. The Earthman was at his side, leading him out. He was given his heat-gun. "But what—why?—I don't understand," Grant said, bewildered.

His escort looked at him, opened his mouth, and showed Grant he was tongueless. He positioned Grant on the square and a moment later Grant was back on the sidewalk.

Discouragement was on him like a great weight. It deadened him. It smothered him. He paced the streets and eventually found himself before a restaurant. He remembered then that he had not eaten for a long time. He went in and ordered oysters. That was about the only meat you could buy in The Pass and be sure of not eating some sentient being. Then, waiting, he sat in a booth with his head between his hands.

It was apparent they didn't want him to have any part of his stones—the stones he had spent six months and risked his life for—the stones that meant so much to him and to Beth. They wanted all of his stones. The dirty Shylocks. They weren't willing to take half, or two-thirds, or three-fourths. They wanted all. They weren't willing for him to have any part of them. He would have settled for ten per cent, which would have been over fifty thousand dollars, but they didn't offer him ten per cent. They offered nothing. They wanted all.

Netse must have been contacted by Relegar and told to keep hands off. That was why Grant had wanted to see Netse first. But he had not dreamed that Netse would refuse him entirely. He had thought it would be merely a matter of the price.

Now what could he do? He didn't dare let the constrictor have more than three day's head-start, for the saurian would finish digesting the fish in about five days. That meant Grant would have to start back to the swamp tomorrow. But Relegar's spies would report every move. The minute he set out, Relegar would be notified. And Relegar would come after him. Grant shuddered.

Where his hands touched his face his finger tips were cold.

Relegar would find him. The spider had a locator sense that was infallible. He could set out days later and find Grant unerringly. And how could one fight the Uranian when they met? Relegar's nervous system was so constructed that he was practically impossible to kill. You could boil him or freeze him without injuring him. Uranians had been boiled alive in prussic acid for forty hours without ill effects. You could cut off legs and even sever the head and they would still live. So what could a man do?

There was only one thing Grant knew. That was to go after the stones. They were his and he would never give them up. They might take the stones away from him, but he would never give them up.

So the next morning he overhauled his suit and patched it. He got fresh oxygen and bought a meager supply of food. He had one more good meal and started out south again with the single stone in his watch-pocket.

It took him seven hours to reach the place where he had left the constrictor. It was gone, of course. How far, he could not know. He took the one telepathic stone from his pocket. He found a spot where he could sit in the open, cross-legged, with his eyes fixed on the stone. From the corner of his eye he saw a brown detached eye on a stalk pop up from the surface of the water, but he paid no attention. He concentrated on the stone.

The stone had a fair polish. He looked at its surface and shut out all the normal sounds from his ears. The stone seemed to be in motion on the inside, and presently that motion communicated itself to his mind. He had a picture of a constrictor, lying sleepily in a pool of brown water surrounded by heavy, deep grass that hung over the banks and grew down into the water.

He heard now the distant bellow of a swamp-ox, the buzzing of aquatic bees. Slowly he turned the stone on its edge and revolved it carefully. When the picture was clearest in his mind he picked out an orientation point in the distant mountains. Then, well pleased, he put the stone in his pocket, got into his diving-suit, screwed on the helmet, adjusted the oxygen, and stepped off into the brown water of the swamp.

The bottom here was steep but it was good. It was hard and not more than knee-deep in mud. He traveled carefully, freezing on occasion when huge shadows moved above him. He was in fifty feet of water and he liked that better because it was easier to go unnoticed. He avoided a patch of electric cactus, for the spines would have electrocuted him even through the suit, and he went far around an area of white bull-root, shaped like women's legs, because he knew the bull-root was always infested with swamp-razors that would cut through the seams of his diving-suit.

When he came out of the water he found his orientation point and kept going. He came to a wide stretch of water, and with the wind at his back, made fast time by climbing on an island of floating grass and going straight across. This was important. He needed to find the constrictor by the time Relegar started after him.

The spider could travel much faster than Grant for it walked on water where Grant was forced to wade on the bottom. But Relegar would wait a while. He wouldn't want to be on the surface of Venus any longer than necessary, even for half a million dollars, so he would give Grant plenty of time, since there was no danger of his getting away.

Grant was encouraged by the fact that the constrictor did not appear to be far away. Everything here depended on his reaching the saurian two days ahead of Relegar. Not that he expected to run. That was hopeless. But he did have a partial plan. He thought he knew how to recover the stones and to face the Uranian without being immediately killed. And he hoped for some now unforeseen development that subsequently would help him to get through The Pass.

That last item was a weak point, a very weak point, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He could not wait for a plan. He had to go ahead and trust his own ingenuity to devise a means of getting to Aphrodite later. If he could keep Relegar from going back to The Pass until he himself could get through The Pass, then he would be unmolested, for Relegar was master of The Pass, and no entity of any sort, not even as powerful a one as Netse, would touch any being in whom Relegar was interested unless Relegar himself should

order it.

If Grant could get through The Pass and across Division Street he would be safe, for Aphrodite proper was under the jurisdiction of the Planetary Police, and even Relegar respected them.

GRANT found the constrictor on the second day, lying in a shallow pool with only its dorsal spines showing. Working slowly and carefully and entirely under water, he located the saurian's head, concealed in a clump of floating grass. The reptile was still in something of a torpor from its meal, and Grant had no difficulty in approaching it through the water and attacking it with the heat-gun on the soft part of the neck below the head.

The first bolt must have gone through and severed its spinal column, but Grant risked destruction from the threshing body long enough to burn the head off entirely. He got out on solid ground and waited until sundown for the monster's contortions to die. Then he worked fast. The flying scavenger-foxes were already settling on the constrictor's back and tearing out great chunks of flesh. He went back under water and cut out the saurian's gizzard with the heat-ray. He dragged it off to one side and tremblingly cut it open with his knife, and he was relieved and exultant when he recovered all fifteen of the stones. The bag had disintegrated, but he put the stones carefully in his pockets.

Then he went back once more. He cut off a piece of the hide two feet square. He took only the outer hide, which was dry and which held the great iridescent scales that formed isotopes after death. From some marsh-bamboo and some wire-vines he formed a shield. By that time it was midnight. He turned his light on the pool where the saurian had been, and shuddered. The water was dull red, and alive with creatures fighting each other to get to the carcass. The surface was covered with flying things, some small, some huge, all fighting, fighting. Life on Venus was an eternal, bloody fight. This slaughter, once started, would go on for weeks, until the fighting creatures in this immediate area of the swamp were exhausted.

Grant snapped off the light as clouds of flying things arose. He started down the

neck of dry land and walked all night, going as far as he could without submerging, getting out of range of the holocaust around the dead constrictor. Eventually he came to a lavawood tree. He examined it carefully, then climbed it. He found a crotch in the limbs. He lay down and hung his arms and legs over the limbs, pulled the shield over him, and went to sleep.

From the brilliant, blinding light of the sun even through the clouds, and the vapor arising from the surface of the swamp, he knew it was mid-afternoon when he awoke. He started up, but long habit stopped him almost as soon as he moved. He opened his eyes and was fully awake, listening for the sound that had awakened him. He heard it, a rasping noise like the sound of a knife-blade scraped against the grain of a fresh hog-skin. He looked across the swamp. Less than fifty yards away was Relegar, walking toward him on the water. The sound came from the scraping of his gray poison-mandibles against each other.

Relegar's mouth, as wide as his body, was open. The two bulbous eyes gleamed like pieces of polished metal. They saw Grant. The spider's sixteen jointed legs, that held his purple body three feet above the water, moved too fast for Grant to follow them. The Uranian skittered across a hundred feet of water and walked out on the land.

His bone-scraping voice came to Grant in the tree. "I'll take the stones now." It was a sinister voice. Grant felt a crawling, instinctive horror as the spider came toward him, its jointed legs moving delicately. "You've saved me some trouble by finding them."

Grant overcame his paralysis and reached for the heat-gun. Relegar saw the motion and stopped. "You can't hurt me with that heat-projector," he said. "You might shoot off a leg, but I'd have you half eaten before you could fire a second bolt."

The knowledge hit Grant with what was almost a shock that there was some way he could get the best of Relegar, otherwise the big spider would not have spoken at all. He well knew that he couldn't kill Relegar with the heat-gun. He could burn off a leg, yes, but he doubted that the infra-rays would affect the spider's body at all. He moved a little on the limbs, got a hold on the snake-skin shield, and dropped to the ground.

Relegar darted forward to meet him. But ten feet away the spider stopped, and Grant knew he had felt the radiation from the snakeskin. Relegar's mouth hung open, his white fangs gleaming in the red maw. The two bulbous eyes were suddenly shot with the red fire of anger. Grant did not hesitate. As he landed on the ground he fired a heat-bolt at one of Relegar's left legs. It smoked. There was an odor of burned hair. The queer material of the leg glowed white for an instant and then burned in two and the bottom part dropped off.

Relegar squealed. His two eyes almost exploded in a rage of red. He wasn't permanently injured—he would grow a new leg—but he was furious because he dared not come close to the shield. The radiation would paralyze him within a couple of seconds. Grant saw his body sag a little on the corner where the leg had been, and then he had one of those flashes of intuition that every being had to have, to live long in the swamp. He knew how to win this fight. He trained the heat-gun on the second leg on the same side and pressed the trigger. That leg burned in two and Relegar's body sagged still more.

Grant started on the third one. A feeling of triumph was growing in him. Then Relegar charged.

Grant hadn't expected that. There was little he could do but hold the shield frantically before him to try to ward off the fangs and the mandibles.

He had had no idea that the Uranian's body was so heavy. It seemed to Grant the thing must weigh three or four hundred pounds. It thundered into him and knocked him over as if he had been a straw. The heavy hoofs galloped over him. He was surprised, but he rolled on over and came to his feet, shooting.

He got the fourth and fifth legs this time. Relegar's body sagged considerably, but the spider, his entire body turning red with rage, spun around and charged again. This

time the great mouth was open, the fangs ready, and the mandibles were extended. Grant left himself open until he could feel the spider's fetid breath in his face, then he flung out his shield.

The sharp fangs struck it. Relegar turned into a tornado of fury for perhaps a second, trying to shake the skin from his teeth. But it was too late. The skin came loose, but the radiation had paralyzed the spider. He sank feebly to the ground with the shield under him. His eyes glared with unutterable malignant hate, but that was all. His muscles were impotent.

Grant stood a few feet away, getting his breath, feeling the trip-hammer in his temple slow down to normal. Then he aimed. The sixth, seventh, and eighth legs burned off. He put the pistol in its holster.

"I'm not going to try to kill you," he said. "I suppose that's impossible anyway, short of cutting you up into small pieces, and I don't relish that idea. But I'll leave you the snakeskin. It will have passed the peak of its radioactivity by tomorrow and you can start back for The Pass. But you won't go back very fast. You've got legs on only one side. It's going to be slow navigating, especially on water. In fact, I think maybe you'll have to wait until you grow some new legs."

He patted his pockets filled with half a million dollars' worth of echindul stones. "Long before that I'll be in Aphrodite depositing my stones at the First Interplanetary Bank."

He watched Relegar's eyes turn dead, cold black, then he screwed on his helmet, adjusted the oxygen, and stepped off into the brown water. He felt rather good, wading through the mud at the bottom of the swamp. He was somewhat astonished that it had fallen to him, a nobody, to be the means of breaking up Relegar's hold on The Pass. But it was a very satisfactory feeling. He thought about Beth and New Jersey and strawberries with fresh cream. He sighed happily. His luck had changed.



*If I'm going to die it's going
to be my way — that was
Latham's last thought.*

ONE PURPLE HOPE!

By HENRY HASSE

Once he had been a tall, straight spaceman, free as the galaxies. Now Joel Latham was a tsith-addict, a beach-comber at Venusport. Maybe he'd get one last chance...

HIS sleep-drugged mind was slow to respond. He was lying face down, he knew that. And he ought to get up. If he didn't get up he would drown. Something hot and heavy, like a huge hand, was pressing him deeper into the brackish mire. He pondered. Perhaps it were better

to drown. For a moment he allowed himself the luxury of the thought, then decided against it. Plenty of time later for drowning. First there was something he had to do!

So it was that Joel Latham, Earthman, age thirty, occupation space drifter, avoca-

tion tsith drinker, awakened on this most momentous of mornings.

Moaning in protest, he slowly rolled himself over. The sun slapped him hard against the eyes. He blinked against the pain and saw that he was still in Venusport; rather he was at the edge of the swamp near the sprawling compound. Overhead the ionic field was aglow, humming softly, beating back the obscurant mists.

He managed to stand up. Some of the pallid-faced gweels, out in the swamp, stopped their work to stare at him. Latham grimaced. Every fiber of him, especially his brain, seemed to have been squeezed dry. Then it came. He felt it coming and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The hammering nausea took him suddenly about the middle, bending him double.

"I'm an Earthman," Joel Latham groaned aloud. That was invariably the first reaction of the tsith hound, at least with Terrestrials who indulged in the deadly stuff; a piteous protest half in defiance, half in despair. The nausea reached up through his stomach, through his chest and into his throat. It became more than nausea. It grew thorns that stabbed inwardly, jagged edges that sawed away at his brain with a terrible need. He fell forward on hands and knees . . . and that's when he saw the little Martian who crouched a few feet away, watching him.

"I went through mine a few minutes ago," the Martian said in a monotone. "Yours will go away presently."

"I know . . . it will. Been through this . . . before."

"You obviously have. Many times."

Many times was an understatement, Latham thought wretchedly. But this was one of the worst ones, even worse than the time on Callisto. Thinking about it didn't help.

He turned his gaze back to the Martian. That didn't help either.

Most Martians are lean and brown and ugly. This one was that, and more. What had once been clothes were tattered and spattered with swamp mud. The hair was a wisp, the teeth only a memory. The skin was tight and leathery across the bony structure of the face, the eyes distended and yellow, the unmistakable sign of a tsith hound.

Latham grimaced, managed to grind out: "Do I look as bad as you?"

"Worse," the little Martian was matter-of-fact.

"I believe you." He looked long and hard at the Martian. "I remember you now. Name's Kueelo. You were with me last night—"

Kueelo grinned, showing the stumps of yellowish teeth. "Correction. Four nights ago. That's when it began."

Latham climbed to his feet. The reaction was going away but there was still a dull apathy about his brain. Just to think was an aching effort.

"Four days," he muttered. "How'd I come here?"

"So you don't remember that? You came on the pleasure yacht. The one from Turibek."

"**TURIBEK—**" Latham was remembering now. Turibek, capital city of Venus, far on the other side of the planet. He'd had a small stake and was lucky at the gaming tables. Before that it was Callisto, where he had struck it rich in the iridium fields; anyway, rich enough to keep him supplied with tsith for a year. Before Callisto it had been Mars. He had worked the rocket rooms of Jovian freighters, he had served as tourist guide in the dark little streets of Ganymede City, and when fortune was lowest he had begged in those streets and done worse things than begging. Before that he couldn't remember. He went wherever whim and fortune took him, but the whims were short-lived and the fortune invariably ended at the bottom of a glass. The deadly tsith twisted his brain awry and took its toll and drove him on. He had been "on the beach" on half a dozen planets. Earth he shunned. He hadn't set foot there in more years than he could remember. At first it was because he was ashamed, but even that was gone now. Only a cold sickness was left in the soul of Joel Latham.

He stared at this fellow tsith hound, this shell of a Martian, and said, "What happened last night?"

"What always happens," Kueelo said wearily. "We used up all our credit. Penger kicked us out."

It took Joel Latham a full minute to absorb that piece of information. Mixed up

with the agony in his eyes was a pensive look, but no resentment; his need just now was too dire for resentment. He stared across the swamp at the outpost's straggling street. Jake Penger was the law here, and he owned the only supply of tsith. Latham recalled him vaguely, a huge man, inscrutable, uncompromising.

"Penger," he muttered. "That's it. I knew there was something I was going to do."

"What were you going to do?" Kueelo moved in closer, a sudden light of interest in his eyes.

"See Penger, of course."

"Why?"

"I need tsith! And I'm going to need it worse before this day's over."

Kueelo's eyes went dull again. "We both do. How do you think you're going to manage it?"

"I'll show you. Never let it be said that Joel Latham was helpless in face of an emergency." With unsteady fingers he began a search of his clothes. And that's when the final realization descended upon Joel Latham. These weren't his clothes, not the ones he had when he came here.

He stared into the Martian's mango-like face. "I had a lucky piece. An ancient Deimian jewel set in platinum. It's always been good for credit."

Kueelo's sigh was like a wind through withered leaves. "That," he said, "was used up two nights ago."

"I had a dis-gun, too! What happened to it?"

"We used that up last night. Penger allowed us four drinks apiece for it."

Latham nodded miserably. "The space yacht, I guess it's already gone."

"Two days ago. Your fine feathered friends shunned you when they learned you were a tsith hound. But I stuck by you," Kueelo added cunningly.

Latham sank heavily onto a clump of swamp grass. He stared at his right hand. It had started trembling. He couldn't stop the trembling. He wondered dully if he was frightened, or if that was a result of the terrible craving that twisted and writhed within him. He stared up into the Martian's face.

"Stranded," he said weakly. "But I'll get out of here. I'll hire out on one of the freighters—"

"You won't," Kueelo's voice was matter-of-fact again. "Not when they learn you're a tsith hound. And Penger will let them know, you can bet on that. He's a devil, that Penger."

"But he's an Earthman, and I'm an Earthman!" Latham's voice was almost a wail. His soul was withering within him.

"Tell Penger that and see what he answers you. You're on the beach, my friend. You've been there before, but this is the final beach—the swampside of Venus. And here you'll stay until Penger is ready to let you go. I've been here five years."

Joel Latham put his head in his hands and tried to think. Kueelo's voice droned on:

"You'll work for Penger. You'll work in the swamps. An Earthman, a Martian, a Ganymedian can do ten times the work of one of these gweels." He gestured at the pallid-faced low-Venusians who moved listlessly through the mud, pulling up the draanga-weed. "You'll work for the amount of tsith Penger portions out to you, and glad to get it."

At the word *tsith*, Latham's head came up. The dawning fear was gone from his eyes.

"All right! I'll do it, but only for a while, mind you! I'll find a way out of this. I'm getting back to the iridium fields on Callisto."

He plunged wildly into the mud and sank to his waist. But it was the thought of tsith that drove him on, not Callisto. Kueelo stood by and watched, a thin, knowing smile creasing his leathery lips.

A sort of frenzy had come upon Joel Latham. He tore at the stubborn draanga-weed and brought it up dripping, tossing the long lengths across his shoulder. He knew of this stuff.

When properly synthesized draanga-weed had a medicinal value on the various planets. Penger shipped it out four times a year, at a neat little profit.

Latham moved on. A yellowish fog had come down, the dreaded *igniis fatui*. Unless one kept moving, decomposition of the blood set in, essential salts within the body were dissolved and cellular activity ceased. Latham grinned wryly. He doubted if it could touch him! There was too much tsith within his alchemy. Nevertheless he moved

and worked ceaselessly. He could see that caricature of a Martian standing back there watching.

Then it happened; the thing happened which was to prove both a promise and a despair. Joel Latham felt a hardness at his heel, an irritating lump inside his neoprene boot.

He moved back to higher ground, lifted his foot from the mire and removed the boot. He shook something out into his hand. It was round and hard and shiny, perhaps an inch in diameter. He held it aloft between thumb and forefinger. The filtering sunlight struck it and sent back lambent fires.

Joel Latham stared and gasped, felt his senses reeling.

"Purple!" he sobbed. "A purple Josphian!"

HE WAS clambering back toward Kueelo. Forgetting the sweat in his eyes and the insufferable heat, he held the thing aloft.

"Look at it!" he sobbed again. "Look at it shine! Look at the size!"

Kueelo was indeed looking. His yellowish eyes bulged. "A Josphian," he whispered. "We've struck it rich!"

Joel Latham regarded the little caricature with astonishment. Something of sanity came back to Joel Latham. "We?" he said. "I found it. It's mine. I never knew you until four days ago!"

"But I stood by you," the Martian wailed. "Your friends deserted you, but I stood by. Aren't we partners?"

Latham considered that. "No," he decided. "You stood by me as long as I had credit for tsith! Until my money and lucky piece and dis-gun and clothes were gone. Did you offer to help me out there?" he waved at the swamp. "This Josphian is going to get me back to Callisto! Penger ought to give me plenty for it."

What happened next was too swift for Latham's reeling senses. A claw-like hand darted out, and Kueelo snatched the Josphian; his other hand swung around and caught Latham hard across the throat, sending him back into the swamp where he staggered for a moment and sat down abruptly.

"Hey!" Latham protested. "Hey, look

here—"

But the Martian was scuttling away like a huge fiddler crab, the Josphian clutched in one scrawny fist.

Joel Latham came slowly up out of the mud, shaking his head and grinning stupidly. It was very unkind of Kueelo to treat him like this. He watched the Martian's departing figure. He made no effort to follow—not at once—not until a strange new emotion, part frustration and part despair, rose up in his breast, and close upon that the dawning realization that he was being cheated of a last hope.

Even then he didn't hurry. He followed Kueelo, swinging along in slow loping strides, but not gaining. He felt weak and sick. That jagged need for tsith was again sawing away at his entrails. His feet tangled in the outlying swamp grass, he plunged headlong and picked himself up.

Kueelo was heading for higher ground away from the compound. Kueelo was yelling as he ran. Latham wondered why the devil he was yelling. Then, some distance ahead, Latham could see a third man lifting himself from the ground. The Josphian! Suddenly Latham remembered him. The Josphian had been with them last night too. Now Kueelo was tugging at the man, yelling, showing him the Josphian.

The Josphian hoisted his bulk erect, turned and waited for Latham, grinning broadly. The grin didn't fool Latham. All Josphians grinned. Some of them grinned while breaking a man's vertebrae. This was one of the big ones, Latham noticed, and he was ugly, with long reaching arms and wiry hair and a face that looked as if he'd slept in it.

Latham stopped just short of him and reached out a hand. "I want the Josphian," said Joel Latham.

The Josphian came a step forward. "You leave Kueelo alone. Kueelo, he's my friend."

"I'm going to have that Josphian," said Joel Latham.

The Josphian thrust out a huge fist with amazing speed. Latham caught at it and hung on grimly. The Josphian brought his other hand around in an arc that caught the Earthman across the face, sent him sprawling ten feet away.

"Josphian belongs to us, now. You leave

us alone."

Joel Latham sat there wiping blood from his face, watching the bestial pair as they headed around the compound and into the matted jungle. His last glimpse, just before darkness swallowed them up, was of Kueelo grinning gleefully back at him.

Latham sighed. He stood up. The blow had shaken some of the resolve out of him. He turned east, northeast, east-by-north, like a compass on a binge. Then he saw Penger watching him from the outer gate of the compound. Apparently Penger had seen it all.

Latham turned and ran toward Jake Penger.

"You saw them!" Latham wailed. "You saw it. They stole my Josmian! You've got to stop them!"

PENGER planted his feet wide apart and surveyed the snivelling Earthman. Penger's dark face was hard-cut and impassive. He'd seen these tsith hounds before. They came here and died here. He hated them all.

Penger said, "They did what?"

"The Josphian, the purple Josphian! I found it and they stole it from me. You've got to help me, Penger!"

Penger said, "You're crazy."

"But I found it, I tell you! A big one. I'll sell it to you, Penger. I'll—"

Penger said, "You're crazy with tsith. There hasn't been a Josphian found in this swamp for ten years."

"Penger, listen to me—"

Penger said, "Forget it. You want tsith? You'll have tsith. But you'll work and you'll work hard. You'll get the draanga-weed out."

"Penger, I'm an Earthman! I'm asking you as one Earthman to another—" Latham stopped. He shivered. He looked into Penger's colorless eyes and what he saw made his soul curl up within him.

"You're a what? An Earthman? You were an Earthman! Now you're a grubby little specimen of the genus tsith! You're a miserable, whining little speck of matter wriggling toward the final transfixation! In another year you won't even be that. You'll be dead and forgotten. Don't come crawling to me talking about Earthmen!" The voice scraped across Latham's naked nerve-

ends. Penger's eyes blazed, and in his trembling anger he almost raised a fist.

Latham cringed away. From out of his forgotten past something came to Latham. He stared at the loom of jungle where Kueelo and the Josphian had disappeared.

"I've seen the day," he complained miserably, "when they wouldn't get away with this!"

"You've seen the day—period!"

"I'm asking you once more, Penger. Help me! At least give me back the dis-gun."

"The dis-gun? Now what would you want with the dis-gun? You'd only come trading it back to me. You bring in the draanga-weed, that's all I'm interested in! And if you work especially hard, there'll be some tsith—enough for your needs."

Latham's eyes went fever-bright. His lips writhed back, a fit of trembling took possession of his limbs. Almost, he succumbed to the immediate vision of the tsith; almost, he forgot about the Josphian. But somewhere deep in his alchemy was a well of stubbornness he never knew he possessed.

He clutched at Penger's sleeve as the man turned away. He found himself screaming, "Then I'll go without the gun! I'm going to get that Josphian, do you hear? You'll believe me then! You'll believe when you see it, Penger!"

Penger shook him away. "Sure, sure. You bring me a Josphian. Then we'll talk a deal."

He wanted to ask for a drink, just one drink of tsith right now, but Latham had learned the essential fact that there could be no compromising with this man. He reeled away. His brief outburst had left him weak and trembling. Nevertheless, he went stumbling toward the looming wall of jungle.

He heard Penger's voice, a little annoyed: "Where are you going?"

Latham stumbled on.

"You fool, you don't know these jungles! You'll die in there! You won't last an hour!"

Latham didn't look back. Penger didn't call again. Latham could almost imagine the man's shrug of indifference.

Vision stopped five yards away. A soft glutinous muck, worse than the outer swamp, tugged at his ankles. Corrupt fungi-

growth and giant spiked ferns reached far above him in the blanketing fog.

Penger was wrong! He wouldn't die in here. Latham knew where he was going. Kueelo had told him of the gweel village a mere few miles away, where the foothills came down to touch the jungle edge. Kueelo and the Jovian had undoubtedly headed for there and planned to lie low for a while; when the time was propitious, they would sneak back to the outpost and make a deal with Penger for the Josmian.

The route was long and circuitous, hugging the fringe of jungle. The gweels traveled it every day. But Latham had a better plan. By cutting directly through the morass, he might just arrive there ahead of them!

He would arm himself somehow and wait . . . the element of surprise . . . that's all he could hope for now.

He left the glutinous path, and to his surprise it wasn't so bad. The growths towered many times higher but were not so dense. Occasionally the sun evidenced itself against the paling of mists hundreds of feet above. Lusty, primeval odors were almost an opiate to his senses.

He plunged on for some ten minutes before he began to doubt. Gradually the gloom came alive with motion and sound and unseen terrors. He tried to segregate those that might mean danger. There came first a gentle whirring of wings through the mist, sweeping close above him and away. There came a gentle ripple through the foliage beside him, a slither of sound that kept pace endlessly.

Was this what Penger meant? Still Latham had seen nothing. He wished he had his dis-gun, though.

He wished it desperately, as a heavier sound came near. A grayish bulk charged directly across his path. It was monstrous, semi-reptilian, with wings arched sinuously along its spine as it half reared toward him. Latham fell back against a tree bole and stood motionless, staring into glittering feral eyes. The beast coughed raucously and went thrashing back into the welter of jungle and mud.

Latham stepped away. His foot caught in a root and he fell headlong. Instantly, tiny spheres of diaphanous substance showered about his head, to burst in a scatter of

violet spores. Those that touched his skin turned instantly blood-red, and seemed to grow, burrowing deep. Frantically he pulled them from his flesh, leaving raw red sores.

There was no trail to guide him now, but he did not immediately mind that. He trekked the South Mars Desert and he had weathered the jungles of Io. Tsith hound or no, he had an unerring instinct for direction. He was sure the foothills couldn't be far ahead. But he must have a weapon!

A SILENT dark shadow floated down. He glimpsed a razor-clawed reptilian body, ten feet from wing to wing, its serpentine neck darting wickedly. Latham threw himself aside as the tremendous whirr of wings beat the air above his head. Close upon it came three others, and Latham hit the mud. Looking back, he saw that one of the creatures in its mad rush had hurtled into a giant fern, impaling itself upon a four-foot thorn where it hung, screaming raucously as its life-fluid ebbed away.

Latham crawled from the spot. Reaching another fern, he managed to climb high enough to tear away one of the thorns. It was crude, but it would serve as a weapon!

He was realizing his error now. He should have gone by the outer route. He would never reach the gweel village ahead of Kueelo and the Jovian, if indeed he reached it at all! Danger and death lay everywhere about him. Time and again those serpentine shapes winged down, silent and unwarming. He fended them off. Twice he speared them, saw ocherous blood spill from their shiny integument. Other times he wasn't so lucky, as sharp claws left a row of furrows in his back. The miasmatic yellow fog bit deep into his wounds.

Hours resolved into a nightmare of mud and heat and battle. Other creatures crossed his path or curved at him from out of the tangled fronds. He was becoming awfully weak, but a terrible madness lay across Latham's mind like a patina, driving him on. Through feverish turmoil, through waves of heat and pain and nausea that encompassed the universe, Joel Latham pursued his course.

He never remembered the end. He never remembered coming out of that

deadly jungle. He pressed with his palms against moist earth, and thought he must have been lying there for some time. His left arm was shredded. His back was shredded. Inside his clothes he felt the warm stickiness of his own blood. Outside his clothes was other substance which he knew wasn't his blood.

Something long and shiny lay beneath his hands. The thorn! He clutched at it frantically.

He felt if he could just lie there a moment, strength would come back to him. But he didn't lie there. He tottered to his feet, and just a few yards ahead the foothills sheered up and away from the jungle.

Every step was an agony. He followed along the foothills, trying to find the gweel village. He had to find it! That much he remembered. A tiny Martian and a brute of a Jovian were there, and they had something that belonged to him. He had quite forgotten now what it was, but it meant something to him, he knew, it meant a great deal.

He came upon the village, a cluster of clay huts high upon an escarpment. Latham began climbing. He had to be careful now, something pounded that warning into his brain. He saw groups of frail, pallid-faced gweels moving about. They were harmless enough, Latham knew that; but if those other two were here—

He reached the level of the village and moved nearer, staying behind rocks and clumps of growth. Then he saw Kueelo! The Martian huddled beside an open fire, stirring some substance in a huge gourd. As Latham watched, Kueelo opened a leather pouch at his waist and took something out. The Jovian! He held it up to the flickering firelight, and the purple sheen of the gem was no more brilliant than the gleeful look that appeared in Kueelo's yellowish eyes.

In that instant Latham almost leaped forward, but a tightness in his temples stopped him. The distance was too great. And the Jovian must be somewhere about! Quick surprise was his only chance. His gaze roved up to the steepening cliff behind the village, and he saw the way.

Still clutching the thorn-weapon, he followed a little ravine up to a rocky abut-

ment. Thence along a ledge, to a spot just above the hut near Kueelo. He judged the distance, decided he could make it in two leaps; first to the roof of the hut, then to the ground.

Latham paused the merest instant, then launched himself downward. He struck the roof with a force that jarred him to the teeth. He sprang again, and that's when luck deserted him. His feet tangled in the coarse thatchwork. He felt himself going over the edge, spinning wildly off-balance, plunging headlong into the ground as the thorn-weapon was flung far out of his grasp.

With a startled oath, Kueelo whirled about. Latham had a vision of the man's ludicrous face. Then a tiny, shiny tube appeared like magic in the Martian's hand. A power-rapier. Latham had heard that Martians carried them always. Tiny and easy to conceal. A press of a stud released a rapier-like shaft of electronic power that reached perhaps five feet.

This occurred to Latham in a mere kaleidoscopic instant, then he was propelling himself forward. His shoulder took Kueelo squarely in the middle. Kueelo screamed as he went back. He tried to get the shiny tube up. Latham got hold of the Martian's wrist and jerked it sharply against his knee. Kueelo let out another yell and dropped the power-tube.

THE Martian was small, but possessed of a wiry strength. He was squirming like an ocelot, bringing his knees up into Latham's groin. Latham felt fainter every moment. He let go of the wrist and tried to find the power-tube. Kueelo smashed a fist into his face.

"I'll kill you, Earthman, I swear it! I've got to kill you!" The Martian kept yelling that, his little voice going shrill. Then he yelled, "Kraaz! Kraaz!" Latham got a hand around Kueelo's throat and he didn't yell any more. The place was very still. Then Latham heard a sloughing sound of heavy footsteps coming up the slope. Kraaz was the Jovian! That's when the real panic hit Latham and he knew he had to get the power-rapier.

He fumbled and found the power-rapier. Kueelo brought a knee into his stomach and Latham felt sick. He couldn't get the

weapon around. Kueelo had hold of his wrist and was bending it backward. Latham thought: *Kraaz is coming! If I don't—*

They twisted and rolled and Kueelo was trying with both hands for the weapon. Latham held onto the weapon. Kueelo was using his knees to keep him down and Latham kept feeling weaker. Kueelo kept coming forward and making noises in his throat and he seemed big and heavy. He kept going forward until he got a knee against Latham's throat. Latham thought: *the Jovian's running now, he's almost here—*

Kueelo pressed with his knee and Latham's head went back. His throat was hurting and blocking the air. The knee pressed harder, and it was bad. Then it was very bad. But he wouldn't let go of the power-rapier. *The Jovian'll be here! I've got to—*

Latham moved his hand beneath him. The hand twisted and brought up the tube and his fingers touched a tiny stud. He didn't know which way it was pointing, it was too late to wonder. His finger pressed the stud and Kueelo was screaming. Then the pressure in his throat went away.

He was on his feet as the Jovian came ploughing through the huddle of frightened gweels. Latham tried to get the rapier-tube up, but his arms were numbed and weary, a red mist swam before his eyes. A powerful blow sent the weapon hurtling away, then the Jovian was upon him; huge arms closed about him. It was useless to struggle. Latham could see the man's lips writhing back in a soundless rage.

Latham brought a knee up in a purely desperate move. Kraaz grunted, stumbled and fell, but he didn't let go. They were rolling together down the slope. The Jovian's arms were a vise crushing away his life. Latham had a glimpse of a cliff falling sheerly away, with those deadly thorn-ferns reaching up from below.

If I'm to die, it's going to be my way!

That was Latham's last conscious thought as he surged against the Jovian's bracing body; his fingers clung tenaciously, his last ebbing strength carried them both over the edge. Kraaz's arms broke away. Latham lashed out with his feet, then he was twisting, falling, far out into space . . . and that's all he remembered.

Hands were tugging at him. A shrill chatter of voices rang in his ears. Someone was holding a gourd to his lips, trying to pour a hot sticky substance down his throat. Latham sat up and knocked the gourd away. The little group of gweels fell back. Some of them were still chattering, staring overhead with awe-stricken eyes.

Latham looked up and saw Kraaz, the Jovian. The huge bulk hung twenty feet above, tangled in the foliage of a giant fern.

One thorn had entered his chest, another completely pierced his throat. He was quite dead.

Wearily, Latham made his way back up to the village. Kueelo still lay there with the blackened hole through him. Latham tore away the leather pouch holding the Josmian; he had fought through hell and swamp and jungle for this, and by all the Redtails of Jupiter, he was taking it back! He thought of Penger, and the tsith awaiting him there. Most of all he thought of Callisto and the iridium fields, which would mean much more tsith. Clutching the Josmian as though it were his life's blood, Joel Latham staggered away from there and began the long route back.

THE men at the compound would not soon forget the night when Joel Latham returned. Penger was there of course; some prospectors from the near-by hills, the crew of a supply freighter, a motley scattering of others whose business was unknown and unasked.

They stared in disbelief at the caricature that suddenly came out of the night to stand in the doorway of Penger's place. Clothes ripped in shreds, mud and blood bespattered, one arm dangling, tangled hair that looked unreal as if sewed to his scalp. An awful whiteness about the lips and eyes that were dark empty pools. Maybe it had once been an Earthman, but it was unrecognizable now! Joel Latham stood there for an instant, seeking out Penger behind the bar. Black exhaustion threatened to take him, but with an effort he hoisted himself up.

He made his way across the room and slumped against the bar. Spacemen moved out of his way. There was something about his eyes.

Penger moved down to him, stood staring in amazement.

"So it's you!" said Penger, and seemed unable to say more.

"It's me, all right." Latham's eyes were searching out the rows of bottles. Martian thasium, Earth bourbon, the potent arack from Ganymede. It all left him cold. He was looking for the deadly tsith, and he saw no sign of it. "It's me, all right," Joel Latham said again, and he placed a closed fist upon the bar. "I've come to make that deal with you, Penger!"

His fist opened slowly, and Penger was staring down at the Josphian.

"So it was true! And you really went after that thieving pair . . . you took it from them . . ." Penger's voice was unbelieving, but he continued to stare at the Josphian.

"It's yours if you want it, Penger. Dirt cheap! One thousand credits. That'll be enough to get me out of here on the first freighter, and set up for another try at the Callisto iridium fields. That's all I want."

Penger nodded, took the gem from Latham's hand and held it to the light. "It's a beauty!" He replaced it in Latham's open palm. "But I didn't promise to buy it! All I said was, I'd make you a deal."

Latham felt his stomach turning over. Kueelo had said this man was a devil! He got the words out: "What kind of a deal?"

"You ask one thousand credits. I offer you one thousand glasses of tsith! That'll last you a long time here."

So that was the devil's plan! Latham felt a cold sickness come over him. He was sick from his wounds, sick from exhaustion, sick for the desperate need of tsith. He found himself saying, "One drink right now! And eight hundred credits—"

"No drinks. Not until we make the deal. One thousand glasses of tsith, and that's my final offer."

Latham stared at him. Any spaceman here would offer five times a thousand credits for such a gem! But they sensed that this was private between him and Penger, and no man dared go against Penger here at Venusport. They watched the tableau in silence.

"I've got to get to Callisto!" Latham cried wretchedly, fighting back the sickness. "Here—it's yours—just one drink now, and

enough credits for passage!"

"Why Callisto?" Penger's voice was mocking. "So you make another strike there, and it all ends with tsith anyway!" He reached beneath the bar, brought out a crystal flagon of tsith. For a moment he held the sparkling blue liquid to the light, then placed it on the shelf behind him.

"Damn you!" Latham tried to leap forward, but almost collapsed as waves of nausea shook him.

"So. You see what I mean? In another year you'll be dead anyway, so what does it matter?" Penger leaned forward, smiling thinly. "Earthman, what did you say your name was? Joel Latham, wasn't it?"

Latham swayed and clutched at the bar. He glared at the man, wondering what diabolical scheme he was planning now.

PENGER'S eyes bored into him. "Joel Latham, I knew your father years ago before he died on Mars. He was a fine man. A man of courage. I wonder what Carl Latham would say now if he could see his son—"

"People from here to Mars and back," Latham rasped, "are always telling me they knew my father! I'm sick of hearing about it! All I want to know, do you buy this Josphian or not?"

"I may make you another deal. Suppose I give you the thousand credits. But if I do, you don't go to Callisto."

"Where, then?" Latham's brain was throbbing, seeking out the gimmick. There must be a gimmick.

Penger glanced at a tall, angular man who had stayed in the background. A silent signal passed between them.

"They need a chart man at Asteroid Station Three. The work is not hard but it's a thankless, monotonous existence. You're alone on an anchored world a half-mile in diameter. You sign on for three years, and there you stay. You have every need within reason, including technical library and one-way radio. A government ship brings supplies once a year, and they don't include tsith."

Penger paused and peered at Latham, whose face had gone pale beneath the growth of beard. "Your task would be to chart the thousands of rogue asteroids that cause havoc in the spacelanes every year. I

understand you once knew ray-screens, coordinates and parabolics. You could brush up."

"It seems . . . you know a lot about me!" Latham's voice was frightened. It didn't want to leave his throat. He was staring at the glittering blue tsith behind Penger.

Penger motioned to the tall, angular man with the bright eyes. The man stepped to the bar.

"This is George Elston of Interplanet Commerce. He's been looking for months for the right man. Frankly, I don't think it's you"—Latham felt the impact of Penger's scorn—"but he has a cruiser outside, and he can up graves within half an hour in case you are interested."

"I'm not—" Latham continued to stare at the glittering blue flagon just out of reach.

"I thought not. Well, I've made you two offers. I'll buy your Josphian for credits or tsith!" Penger counted out a thousand credits and slapped them on the bar. He poured a glass of tsith and placed it down gently. "Your choice, Latham! A choice of escape!"

A TERRIBLE quiet had come over the room. Latham's eyes were fever-bright, burning deep in his skull. His stomach twisted like a nest of cold serpents. A choice of escape! There was no choice. There was only tsith. He had only to take it. Penger was right. He would die here within a year, but he had resigned himself to that.

He would die out there on the Station, too; he would die a thousand deaths without tsith. Three years! Latham had heard of a few tsith hounds who tried it. He knew in every detail the agonies of body and mind a man went through, before the absence of the stuff either broke him of the terrible need, or left him a gibbering, mindless wreck. Not many of them ever pulled through it.

Joel Latham thought of all this and made his choice. He slammed the Josphian on the bar; his trembling hand seized the glass.

Penger shrugged and sighed as if this was what he expected. He took up the Josphian. "The deal is closed, Latham! I'd better put this away in my safe."

He walked to the end of the bar. When

he came back, the glass in Latham's hand was empty.

Penger met George Elston's gaze. "You'll have to keep looking, Elston. You'll have to look for a man, not a—"

The tall man smiled, stopping the words. He pointed to the mirror where a splash of blue, glutinous tsith was dripping.

Latham threw the empty glass at Penger's head. It missed him and struck the mirror, bringing it down in shattering fragments. He seized the bundle of credits and sent them flying.

"Keep these too, Penger! Keep them all, damn you! I won't need them where I'm going!" Tottering and pale, a fury still upon his lips, he seized Elston's arm. "Come on! Make it quick—"

Elston hurried with him. At the door, he pointed across the compound. "The black cruiser, there beside the freighter. Get aboard. I'll be with you in five minutes—"

Penger was at the door too. They watched Latham hurrying, stumbling, not looking back.

Then Penger did an amazing thing. He opened his fist and he still held the Josphian. He placed it on the floor, put a heavy heel on it and came down with all his weight. There was an absurd little pop as the Josphian shattered.

Elston stared at him, bewildered.

"Not a Josphian," Penger grinned at him. "Glass. One of the cheap glass baubles that sometimes come here on the trade freighters." He gripped Elston's arm. "But don't tell him! Don't ever tell him, at least not for three years."

"But I thought he found it in the swamp!"

"He found it in his boot, where I placed it when I found him lying out there this morning in a stupor. An experiment, a whim—" Penger shrugged. "I didn't know what would come of it."

Joel Latham had almost reached the cruiser. They saw him pause, and then he turned. Joel Latham raised a fist and shook it straight at Penger.

"Damn you, Penger! Damn you, damn you!"

With that he stumbled up into the waiting lock as Elston hurried after him.



ACID BATH

By VASELEOS GARSON

The starways' Lone Watcher had expected some odd developments in his singular, nerve-fraught job on the asteroid. But nothing like the weird twenty-one-day liquid test devised by the invading Steel-blues.

JON KARYL was bolting in a new baffle plate on the stationary rocket engine. It was a tedious job and took all his concentration. So he wasn't paying too much attention to what was going on in other parts of the little asteroid.

He didn't see the peculiar blue space ship, its rockets throttled down, as it drifted to land only a few hundred yards away from his plastic igloo.

Nor did he see the half-dozen steel-blue creatures slide out of the peculiar vessel's airlock.

It was only as he crawled out of the depths of the rocket power plant that he realized something was wrong.

By then it was almost too late. The six

blue figures were only fifty feet away, approaching him at a lope.

Jon Karyl took one look and went bounding over the asteroid's rocky slopes in fifty-foot bounds.

When you're a Lone Watcher, and strangers catch you unawares, you don't stand still. You move fast. It's the Watcher's first rule. Stay alive. An Earthship may depend upon your life.

As he fled, Jon Karyl cursed softly under his breath. The automatic alarm should have shrilled out a warning.

Then he saved as much of his breath as he could as some sort of power wave tore up the rocky sward to his left. He twisted and zig-zagged in his flight, trying to get

out of sight of the strangers.

Once hidden from their eyes, he could cut back and head for the underground entrance to the service station.

He glanced back finally.

Two of the steel-blue creatures were jack-rabbling after him, and rapidly closing the distance.

Jon Karyl unsheathed the stubray pistol at his side, turned the oxygen dial up for greater exertion, increased the gravity pull in his space-suit boots as he neared the ravine he'd been racing for.

The oxygen was just taking hold when he hit the lip of the ravine and began sprinting through its man-high bush-strewn course.

The power ray from behind ripped out great gobs of the sheltering bushes. But running naturally, bent close to the bottom of the ravine, Jon Karyl dodged the bare spots. The oxygen made the tremendous exertion easy for his lungs as he sped down the dim trail, hidden from the two steel-blue stalkers.

He'd eluded them, temporarily at least, Jon Karyl decided when he finally edged off the dim trail and watched for movement along the route behind him.

He stood up, finally, pushed aside the leafy overhang of a bush and looked for landmarks along the edge of the ravine.

He found one, a stubby bush, shaped like a maltese cross, clinging to the lip of the ravine. The hidden entrance to the service station wasn't far off.

His pistol held ready, he moved quietly on down the ravine until the old water course made an abrupt hairpin turn.

Instead of following around the sharp bend, Jon Karyl moved straight ahead through the overhanging bushes until he came to a dense thicket. Dropping to his hands and knees he worked his way under the edge of the thicket into a hollowed-out space in the center.

THERE, just ahead of him, was the lock leading into the service station. Slipping a key out of a leg pouch on the space suit, he jabbed it into the center of the lock, opening the lever housing.

He pulled strongly on the lever. With a hiss of escaping air, the lock swung open. Jon Karyl darted inside, the door closing

softly behind.

At the end of the long tunnel he stepped to the televisor which was fixed on the area surrounding the station.

Jon Karyl saw none of the steel-blue creatures. But he saw their ship. It squatted like a smashed-down kid's top, its lock shut tight.

He tuned the televisor to its widest range and finally spotted one of the Steel-Blues. He was looking into the stationary rocket engine.

As Karyl watched, a second Steel-Blue came crawling out of the ship.

The two Steel-Blues moved toward the center of the televisor range. They're coming toward the station, Karyl thought grimly.

Karyl examined the two creatures. They were of the steel-blue color from the crown of their egg-shaped heads to the tips of their walking appendages.

They were about the height of Karyl—six feet. But where he tapered from broad shoulders to flat hips, they were straight up and down. They had no legs, just appendages, many jointed that stretched and shrank independent of the other, but keeping the cylindrical body with its four pairs of tentacles on a level balance.

Where their eyes would have been was an elliptical shaped lens, covering half the egg-head, with its covering ends curving around the sides of the head.

Robots! Jon gauged immediately. But where were their masters?

The Steel-Blues moved out of the range of the televisor. A minute later Jon heard a pounding from the station upstairs.

He chuckled. They were like the wolf of pre-atomic days who huffed and puffed to blow the house down.

The outer shell of the station was formed from stelrylite, the toughest metal in the solar system. With the self-sealing lock of the same resistant material, a mere pounding was nothing.

Jon thought he'd have a look-see anyway. He went up the steel ladder leading to the station's power plant and the televisor that could look into every room within the station.

He heaved a slight sigh when he reached the power room, for right at his hand were weapons to blast the ship from the asteroid.

Jon adjusted one televisor to take in the

lock to the station. His teeth suddenly clamped down on his lower lip.

Those Steel-Blues were pounding holes into the stelyrlite with round-headed metal clubs. But it was impossible. Stelyrlite didn't break up that easily.

Jon leaped to a row of studs, lining up the revolving turret which capped the station so that its thin fin pointed at the squat ship of the invaders.

Then he went to the atomic cannon's firing buttons.

He pressed first the yellow, then the blue button. Finally the red one.

The thin fin—the cannon's sight—split in half as the turret opened and the coiled nose of the cannon protruded. There was a soundless flash. Then a sharp crack.

Jon was dumbfounded when he saw the bolt ricochet off the ship. This was no ship of the solar system. There was nothing that could withstand even the slight jolt of power given by the station cannon on any of the Sun's worlds. But what was this? A piece of the ship had changed. A bubble of metal, like a huge drop of blue wax, dripped off the vessel and struck the rocket of the asteroid. It steamed and ran in rivulets.

He pressed the red button again.

Then abruptly he was on the floor of the power room, his legs strangely cut out from under him. He tried to move them. They lay flaccid. His arms seemed all right and tried to lever himself to an upright position.

Damn it, he seemed as if he were paralyzed from the waist down. But it couldn't happen that suddenly.

He turned his head.

A Steel-Blue stood facing him. A forked tentacle held a square black box.

Jon could read nothing in that metallic face. He said, voice muffled by the confines of the plastic helmet, "Who are you?"

"I am"—there was a rising inflection in the answer—"a Steel-Blue."

There were no lips on the Steel-Blue's face to move. "That is what I have named you," Jon Karyl said. "But what are you?"

"A robot," came the immediate answer. Jon was quite sure then that the Steel-Blue was telepathic. "Yes," the Steel-Blue answered. "We talk in the language of the mind. Come!" he said peremptorily, motioning with the square black box.

The paralysis left Karyl's legs. He fol-

lowed the Steel-Blue, aware that the lens he'd seen on the creature's face had a counterpart on the back of the egg-head.

Eyes in the back of his head, Jon thought. That's quite an innovation. "Thank you," Steel-Blue said.

There wasn't much fear in Jon Karyl's mind. Psychiatrists had proved that when he had applied for this high-paying but man-killing job as a Lone Watcher on the Solar System's starways.

He had little fear now, only curiosity. These Steel-Blues didn't seem inimical. They could have snuffed out my life very simply. Perhaps they and Solarians can be friends.

Steel-Blue chuckled.

JON followed him through the sundered lock of the station. Karyl stopped for a moment to examine the wreckage of the lock. It had been punched full of holes as if it had been some soft cheese instead of a metal which Earthmen had spent nearly a century perfecting.

"We appreciate your compliment," Steel-Blue said. "But that metal also is found on our world. It's probably the softest and most malleable we have. We were surprised you—earthmen, is it?—use it as protective metal."

"Why are you in this system?" Jon asked, hardly expecting an answer.

It came anyway. "For the same reason you Earthmen are reaching out farther into your system. We need living room. You have strategically placed planets for our use. We will use them."

Jon sighed. For 400 years scientists had been preaching preparedness as Earth flung her ships into the reaches of the solar system, taking the first long step toward the conquest of space.

There are other races somewhere, they argued. As strong and smart as man, many of them so transcending man in mental and inventive power that we must be prepared to strike the minute danger shows.

Now here was the answer to the scientists' warning. Invasion by extra-terrestrials.

"What did you say?" asked Steel-Blue. "I couldn't understand."

"Just thinking to myself," Jon answered. It was a welcome surprise. Apparently his thoughts had to be directed outward, rather

than inward, in order for the Steel-Blues to read it.

He followed the Steel-Blue into the gaping lock of the invaders' space ship wondering how he could warn Earth. The Space Patrol cruiser was due in for refueling at his service station in 21 days. But by that time he probably would be mouldering in the rocky dust of the asteroid.

It was pitch dark within the ship but the Steel-Blue seemed to have no trouble at all maneuvering through the maze of corridors. Jon followed him, attached to one tentacle.

Finally Jon and his guide entered a circular room, bright with light streaming from a glass-like, bulging skylight. They apparently were near topside of the vessel.

A Steel-Blue, more massive than his guide and with four more pair of tentacles, including two short ones that grew from the top of its head, spoke out.

"This is the violator?" Jon's Steel-Blue nodded.

"You know the penalty? Carry it out."

"He also is an inhabitant of this system," Jon's guide added.

"Examine him first, then give him the death."

Jon Karyl shrugged as he was led from the lighted room through more corridors. If it got too bad he still had the stubray pistol.

Anyway, he was curious. He'd taken on the lonely, nerve-wracking job of service station attendant just to see what it offered.

Here was a part of it, and it was certainly something new.

"This is the examination room," his Steel-Blue said, almost contemptuously.

A green effulgence surrounded him.

THERE was a hiss. Simultaneously, as the tiny microphone on the outside of his suit picked up the hiss, he felt a chill go through his body. Then it seemed as if a half dozen hands were inside him, examining his internal organs. His stomach contracted. He felt a squeeze on his heart. His lungs tickled.

There were several more queer motions inside his body.

Then another Steel-Blue voice said:

"He is a soft-metal creature, made up of metals that melt at a very low temperature. He also contains a liquid whose makeup I

cannot ascertain by ray-probe. Bring him back when the torture is done."

Jon Karyl grinned a trifle wryly. What kind of torture could this be?

Would it last 21 days? He glanced at the chronometer on his wrist.

Jon's Steel-Blue led him out of the alien ship and halted expectantly just outside the ship's lock.

Jon Karyl waited, too. He thought of the stubray pistol holstered at his hip. Shoot my way out? It'd be fun while it lasted. But he toted up the disadvantages.

He either would have to find a hiding place on the asteroid, and if the Steel-Blues wanted him bad enough they could tear the whole place to pieces, or somehow get aboard the little life ship hidden in the service station.

In that he would be just a sitting duck.

He shrugged off the slight temptation to use the pistol. He was still curious.

And he was interested in staying alive as long as possible. There was a remote chance he might warn the SP ship. Unconsciously, he glanced toward his belt to see if the little powerpack which, under ideal conditions, could finger out fifty thousand miles into space.

If he could somehow stay alive the 21 days he might be able to warn the patrol. He couldn't do it by attempting to flee, for his life would be snuffed out immediately.

The Steel-Blue said quietly:

"It might be ironical to let you warn that SP ship you keep thinking about. But we know your weapon now. Already our ship is equipped with a force field designed especially to deflect your atomic guns."

Jon Karyl covered up his thoughts quickly. They can delve deeper than the surface of the mind. Or wasn't I keeping a leash on my thoughts?

The Steel-Blue chuckled. "You get—absent-minded, is it?—every once in a while."

Just then four other Steel-Blues appeared lugging great sheets of plastic and various other equipment.

They dumped their loads and began unbundling them.

Working swiftly, they built a plastic igloo, smaller than the living room in the larger service station igloo. They ranged instruments inside—one of them Jon Karyl

recognized as an airpump from within the station—and they laid out a pallet.

When they were done Jon saw a miniature reproduction of the service station, lacking only the cannon cap and fin, and with clear plastic walls instead of the opaqueness of the other.

His Steel-Blue said: "We have reproduced the atmosphere of your station so that you be watched while you undergo the torture under the normal conditions of your life."

"What is this torture?" Jon Karyl asked.

The answer was almost caressing: "It is a liquid we use to dissolve metals. It causes joints to harden if even so much as a drop remains on it long. It eats away the metal, leaving a scaly residue which crumbles eventually into dust.

"We will dilute it with a harmless liquid for you since No. 1 does not wish you to die instantly.

"Enter your"—the Steel-Blue hesitated—"mausoleum. You die in your own atmosphere. However, we took the liberty of purifying it. There were dangerous elements in it."

Jon walked into the little igloo. The Steel-Blues sealed the lock, fingered dials and switches on the outside. Jon's space suit deflated. Pressure was building up in the igloo.

He took a sample of the air, found that it was good, although quite rich in oxygen compared with what he'd been using in the service station and in his suit.

With a sigh of relief he took off his helmet and gulped huge draughts of the air.

He sat down on the pallet and waited for the torture to begin.

The Steel Blues crowded about the igloo, staring at him through elliptical eyes.

Apparently, they too, were waiting for the torture to begin.

Jon thought the excess of oxygen was making him light-headed.

He stared at a cylinder which was beginning to sprout tentacles from the circle. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. An opening, like the adjustable eye-piece of a space-scope, was appearing in the center of the cylinder.

A square, glass-like tumbler sat in the opening disclosed in the four-foot cylinder that had sprouted tentacles. It contained a

yellowish liquid.

One of the tentacles reached into the opening and clasped the glass. The opening closed and the cylinder, propelled by locomotor appendages, moved toward Jon.

He didn't like the looks of the liquid in the tumbler. It looked like an acid of some sort. He raised to his feet.

He unsheathed the stubray gun and prepared to blast the cylinder.

THE cylinder moved so fast Jon felt his eyes jump in his head. He brought the stubray gun up—but he was helpless. The pistol kept on going up. With a deft movement, one of the tentacles had speared it from his hand and was holding it out of his reach.

Jon kicked at the glass in the cylinder's hand. But he was too slow. Two tentacles gripped the kicking leg. Another struck him in the chest, knocking him to the pallet. The same tentacle, assisted by a new one, pinioned his shoulders.

Four tentacles held him supine. The cylinder lifted a glass-like cap from the tumbler of liquid.

Lying there helplessly, Jon was remembering an old fairy tale he'd read as a kid. Something about a fellow named Socrates who was given a cup of hemlock to drink. It was the finis for Socrates. But the old hero had been nonchalant and calm about the whole thing.

With a sigh, Jon Karyl, who was curious unto death, relaxed and said, "All right, bub, you don't have to force-feed me. I'll take it like a man."

The cylinder apparently understood him, for it handed him the tumbler. It even holstered his stubray pistol.

Jon brought the glass of liquid under his nose. The fumes of the liquid were pungent. It brought tears to his eyes.

He looked at the cylinder, then at the Steel-Blues crowding around the plastic igloo. He waved the glass at the audience.

"To Earth, ever triumphant," he toasted. Then he drained the glass at a gulp.

Its taste was bitter, and he felt hot prickles jab at his scalp. It was like eating very hot peppers. His eyes filled with tears. He coughed as the stuff went down.

But he was still alive, he thought in amazement. He'd drunk the hemlock and

was still alive.

The reaction set in quickly. He hadn't known until then how tense he'd been. Now with the torture ordeal over, he relaxed. He laid down on the pallet and went to sleep.

There was one lone Steel-Blue watching him when he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and sat up.

He vanished almost instantly. He, or another like him, returned immediately accompanied by a half-dozen others, including the multi-tentacled creature known as No. 1.

One said,

"You are alive." The thought registered amazement. "When you lost consciousness, we thought you had"—there was a hesitation—"as you say, died."

"No," Jon Karyl said. "I didn't die. I was just plain dead-beat so I went to sleep." The Steel-Blues apparently didn't understand.

"Good it is that you live. The torture will continue," spoke No. 1 before loping away.

The cylinder business began again. This time, Jon drank the bitter liquid slowly, trying to figure out what it was. It had a familiar, tantalizing taste but he couldn't quite put a taste-finger on it.

His belly said he was hungry. He glanced at his chronometer. Only 20 days left before the SP ship arrived.

Would this torture—he chuckled—last until then? But he was growing more and more conscious that his belly was screaming for hunger. The liquid had taken the edge off his thirst.

It was on the fifth day of his torture that Jon Karyl decided that he was going to get something to eat or perish in the attempt.

The cylinder sat passively in its niche in the circle. A dozen Steel-Blues were watching as Jon put on his helmet and unsheathed his stubray.

They merely watched as he pressed the stubray's firing stud. Invisible rays licked out of the bulbous muzzle of the pistol. The plastic splintered.

Jon was out of his goldfish bowl and striding toward his own igloo adjacent to the service station when a Steel-Blue accosted him.

"Out of my way," grunted Jon, waving the stubray. "I'm hungry."

"I'm the first Steel-Blue you met," said

the creature who barred his way. "Go back to your torture."

"But I'm so hungry I'll chew off one of your tentacles and eat it without seasoning."

"Eat?" The Steel-Blue sounded puzzled.

"I want to refuel. I've got to have food to keep my engine going."

Steel-Blue chuckled. "So the hemlock, as you call it, is beginning to affect you at last? Back to the torture room."

"Like R-dust," Jon growled. He pressed the firing stud on the stubray gun. One of Steel-Blue's tentacles broke off and fell to the rocky sward.

Steel-Blue jerked out the box he'd used once before. A tentacle danced over it.

Abruptly Jon found himself standing on a pinnacle of rock. Steel-Blue had cut a swath around him 15 feet deep and five feet wide.

"Back to the room," Steel-Blue commanded.

Jon resheathed the stubray pistol, shrugged non-committally and leaped the trench. He walked slowly back and entered the torture chamber.

The Steel-Blues rapidly repaired the damage he'd done.

As he watched them, Jon was still curious, but he was getting mad underneath at the cold egoism of the Steel-Blues.

By the shimmering clouds of Earth, by her green fields, and dark forests, he'd stay alive to warn the SP ship.

Yes, he'd stay alive till then. And send the story of the Steel-Blues' corrosive acid to it. Then hundreds of Earth's ships could equip themselves with spray guns and squirt citric acid and watch the Steel-Blues fade away.

It sounded almost silly to Jon Karyl. The fruit acid of Earth to repel these invaders—it doesn't sound possible. That couldn't be the answer.

Citric acid wasn't the answer, Jon Karyl discovered a week later.

The Steel-Blue who had captured him in the power room of the service station came in to examine him.

"You're still holding out, I see," he observed after poking Jon in every sensitive part of his body.

"I'll suggest to No. 1 that we increase the power of the—ah—hemlock. How do you feel?"

Between the rich oxygen and the dizziness of hunger, Jon was a bit delirious. But he answered honestly enough: "My guts feel as if they're chewing each other up. My bones ache. My joints creak. I can't coordinate I'm so hungry."

"That is the hemlock," Steel-Blue said.

It was when he quaffed the new and stronger draught that Jon knew that his hope that it was citric acid was squelched.

The acid taste was weaker which meant that the citric acid was the diluting liquid. It was the liquid he couldn't taste beneath the tang of the citric acid that was the corrosive acid.

On the fourteenth day, Jon was so weak he didn't feel much like moving around. He let the cylinder feed him the hemlock.

No. 1 came again to see him, and went away chuckling, "Decrease the dilution. This Earthman at last is beginning to suffer."

STAYING alive had now become a fetish with Jon.

On the sixteenth day, the Earthman realized that the Steel-Blues also were waiting for the SP ship.

The extra-terrestrials had repaired the blue ship where the service station atomic ray had struck. And they were doing a little target practice with plastic bubbles only a few miles above the asteroid.

When his chronometer clocked off the beginning of the twenty-first day, Jon received a tumbler of the hemlock from the hands of No. 1 himself.

"It is the hemlock," he chuckled, "undiluted. Drink it and your torture is over. You will die before your SP ship is destroyed."

"We have played with you long enough. Today we begin to toy with your SP ship. Drink up, Earthman, drink to enslavement."

Weak though he was Jon lunged to his feet, spilling the tumbler of liquid. It ran cool along the plastic arm of his space suit. He changed his mind about throwing the contents on No. 1.

With a smile he set the glass at his lips and drank. Then he laughed at No. 1.

"The SP ship will turn your ship into jelly."

No. 1 swept out, chuckling. "Boast if you will, Earthman, it's your last chance."

There was an exultation in Jon's heart that deadened the hunger and washed away the nausea.

At last he knew what the hemlock was.

He sat on the pallet adjusting the little power pack radio. The SP ship should now be within range of the set. The space patrol was notorious for its accuracy in keeping to schedule. Seconds counted like years. They had to be on the nose, or it meant disaster or death.

He sent out the call letters.

"AX to SP-101 . . . AX to SP-101 . . . AX to SP-101 . . ."

Three times he sent the call, then began sending his message, hoping that his signal was reaching the ship. He couldn't know if they answered. Though the power pack could get out a message over a vast distance, it could not pick up messages even when backed by an SP ship's power unless the ship was only a few hundred miles away.

The power pack was strictly a distress signal.

He didn't know how long he'd been sending, nor how many times his weary voice had repeated the short but desperate message.

He kept watching the heavens and hoping.

Abruptly he knew the SP ship was coming, for the blue ship of the Steel-Blues was rising silently from the asteroid.

Up and up it rose, then flames flickered in a circle about its curious shape. The ship disappeared, suddenly accelerating.

Jon Karyl strained his eyes.

Finally he looked away from the heavens to the two Steel-Blues who stood negligently outside the goldfish bowl.

Once more, Jon used the stubray pistol. He marched out of the plastic igloo and ran toward the service station.

He didn't know how weak he was until he stumbled and fell only a few feet from his prison.

The Steel-Blues just watched him.

He crawled on, around the circular pit in the sward of the asteroid where one Steel-Blue had shown him the power of his weapon.

He'd been crawling through a nightmare for years when the quiet voice penetrated his dulled mind.

"Take it easy, Karyl. You're among friends."

He pried open his eyes with his will. He saw the blue and gold of a space guard's uniform. He sighed and drifted into unconsciousness.

HE WAS still weak days later when Capt. Ron Small of SP-101 said,

"Yes, Karyl, it's ironical. They fed you what they thought was sure death, and it's the only thing that kept you going long enough to warn us."

"I was dumb for a long time," Karyl said. "I thought that it was the acid, almost to the very last. But when I drank that last glass, I knew they didn't have a chance."

"They were metal monsters. No wonder they feared that liquid. It would rust their joints, short their wiring, and kill them. No wonder they stared when I kept alive after drinking enough to completely annihilate a half-dozen of them."

"But what happened when you met the ship?"

The space captain grinned.

"Not much. Our crew was busy creating a hollow shell filled with *water* to be shot

out of a rocket tube converted into a projectile thrower.

"These Steel-Blues, as you call them, put traction beams on us and started tugging us toward the asteroid. We tried a couple of atomic shots but when they just glanced off, we gave up."

"They weren't expecting the shell of water. When it hit that blue ship, you could almost see it oxidize before your eyes."

"I guess they knew what was wrong right away. They let go the traction beams and tried to get away. They forgot about the force field, so we just poured atomic fire into the weakening ship. It just melted away."

Jon Karyl got up from the divan where he'd been lying. "They thought I was a metal creature, too. But where do you suppose they came from?"

The captain shrugged. "Who knows?"

Jon set two glasses on the table.

"Have a drink of the best damn water in the solar system?" He asked Capt. Small.

"Don't mind if I do."

The water twinkled in the two glasses, winking as if it knew just what it had done.

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—(SUMMER ISSUE)—



"The wub, sir," Peterson said. "It spoke!"

BEYOND LIES THE WUB

By PHILIP K. DICK

*The slovenly wub might well have said: Many men
talk like philosophers and live like fools.*

THEY had almost finished with the loading. Outside stood the Optus, his arms folded, his face sunk in gloom. Captain Franco walked leisurely down the gangplank, grinning.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You're getting paid for all this."

The Optus said nothing. He turned away,

collecting his robes. The Captain put his boot on the hem of the robe.

"Just a minute. Don't go off. I'm not finished."

"Oh?" The Optus turned with dignity. "I am going back to the village." He looked toward the animals and birds being driven up the gangplank into the spaceship. "I

must organize new hunts."

Franco lit a cigarette. "Why not? You people can go out into the veldt and track it all down again. But when we run out halfway between Mars and Earth—"

The Optus went off, wordless. Franco joined the first mate at the bottom of the gangplank.

"How's it coming?" he said. He looked at his watch. "We got a good bargain here."

The mate glanced at him sourly. "How do you explain that?"

"What's the matter with you? We need it more than they do."

"I'll see you later, Captain." The mate threaded his way up the plank, between the long-legged Martian go-birds, into the ship. Franco watched him disappear. He was just starting up after him, up the plank toward the port, when he saw it.

"My God!" He stood staring, his hands on his hips. Peterson was walking along the path, his face red, leading it by a string.

"I'm sorry, Captain," he said, tugging at the string. Franco walked toward him.

"What is it?"

The wub stood sagging, its great body settling slowly. It was sitting down, its eyes half shut. A few flies buzzed about its flank, and it switched its tail.

It sat. There was silence.

"It's a wub," Peterson said. "I got it from a native for fifty cents. He said it was a very unusual animal. Very respected."

"This?" Franco poked the great sloping side of the wub. "It's a pig! A huge dirty pig!"

"Yes sir, it's a pig. The natives call it a wub."

"A huge pig. It must weigh four hundred pounds." Franco grabbed a tuft of the rough hair. The wub gasped. Its eyes opened, small and moist. Then its great mouth twitched.

A tear rolled down the wub's cheek and splashed on the floor.

"Maybe it's good to eat," Peterson said nervously.

"We'll soon find out," Franco said.

THE wub survived the take-off, sound asleep in the hold of the ship. When they were out in space and everything was running smoothly, Captain Franco bade his

men fetch the wub upstairs so that he might perceive what manner of beast it was.

The wub grunted and wheezed, squeezing up the passageway.

"Come on," Jones grated, pulling at the rope. The wub twisted, rubbing its skin off on the smooth chrome walls. It burst into the ante-room, tumbling down in a heap. The men leaped up.

"Good Lord," French said. "What is it?"

"Peterson says it's a wub," Jones said. "It belongs to him." He kicked at the wub. The wub stood up unsteadily, panting.

"What's the matter with it?" French came over. "Is it going to be sick?"

They watched. The wub rolled its eyes mournfully. It gazed around at the men.

"I think it's thirsty," Peterson said. He went to get some water. French shook his head.

"No wonder we had so much trouble taking off. I had to reset all my ballast calculations."

Peterson came back with the water. The wub began to lap gratefully, splashing the men.

Captain Franco appeared at the door.

"Let's have a look at it." He advanced, squinting critically. "You got this for fifty cents?"

"Yes, sir," Peterson said. "It eats almost anything. I fed it on grain and it liked that. And then potatoes, and mash, and scraps from the table, and milk. It seems to enjoy eating. After it eats it lies down and goes to sleep."

"I see," Captain Franco said. "Now, as to its taste. That's the real question. I doubt if there's much point in fattening it up any more. It seems fat enough to me already. Where's the cook? I want him here. I want to find out—"

The wub stopped lapping and looked up at the Captain.

"Really, Captain," the wub said. "I suggest we talk of other matters."

The room was silent.

"What was that?" Franco said. "Just now."

"The wub, sir," Peterson said. "It spoke."

They all looked at the wub.

"What did it say? What did it say?"

"It suggested we talk about other things."

Franco walked toward the wub. He went all around it, examining it from every side.

Then he came back over and stood with the men.

"I wonder if there's a native inside it," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe we should open it up and have a look."

"Oh, goodness!" the wub cried. "Is that all you people can think of, killing and cutting?"

Franco clenched his fists. "Come out of there! Whoever you are, come out!"

Nothing stirred. The men stood together, their faces blank, staring at the wub. The wub swished its tail. It belched suddenly.

"I beg your pardon," the wub said.

"I don't think there's anyone in there," Jones said in a low voice. They all looked at each other.

The cook came in.

"You wanted me, Captain?" he said. "What's this thing?"

"This is a wub," Franco said. "It's to be eaten. Will you measure it and figure out—"

"I think we should have a talk," the wub said. "I'd like to discuss this with you, Captain, if I might. I can see that you and I do not agree on some basic issues."

The Captain took a long time to answer. The wub waited good-naturedly, licking the water from its jowls.

"Come into my office," the Captain said at last. He turned and walked out of the room. The wub rose and padded after him. The men watched it go out. They heard it climbing the stairs.

"I wonder what the outcome will be," the cook said. "Well, I'll be in the kitchen. Let me know as soon as you hear."

"Sure," Jones said. "Sure."

THE wub eased itself down in the corner with a sigh. "You must forgive me," it said. "I'm afraid I'm addicted to various forms of relaxation. When one is as large as I—"

The Captain nodded impatiently. He sat down at his desk and folded his hands.

"All right," he said. "Let's get started. You're a wub? Is that correct?"

The wub shrugged. "I suppose so. That's what they call us, the natives, I mean. We have our own term."

"And you speak English? You've been in contact with Earthmen before?"

"No."

"Then how do you do it?"

"Speak English? Am I speaking English? I'm not conscious of speaking anything in particular. I examined your mind—"

"My mind?"

"I studied the contents, especially the semantic warehouse, as I refer to it—"

"I see," the Captain said. "Telepathy. Of course."

"We are a very old race," the wub said.

"Very old and very ponderous. It is difficult for us to move around. You can appreciate that anything so slow and heavy would be at the mercy of more agile forms of life. There was no use in our relying on physical defenses. How could we win? Too heavy to run, too soft to fight, too good-natured to hunt for game—"

"How do you live?"

"Plants. Vegetables. We can eat almost anything. We're very catholic. Tolerant, eclectic, catholic. We live and let live. That's how we've gotten along."

The wub eyed the Captain.

"And that's why I so violently objected to this business about having me boiled. I could see the image in your mind— most of me in the frozen food locker, some of me in the kettle, a bit for your pet cat—"

"So you read minds?" the Captain said.

"How interesting. Anything else? I mean, what else can you do along those lines?"

"A few odds and ends," the wub said absently, staring around the room. "A nice apartment you have here, Captain. You keep it quite neat. I respect life-forms that are tidy. Some Martian birds are quite tidy. They throw things out of their nests and sweep them—"

"Indeed." The Captain nodded. "But to get back to the problem—"

"Quite so. You spoke of dining on me. The taste, I am told, is good. A little fatty, but tender. But how can any lasting contact be established between your people and mine if you resort to such barbaric attitudes? Eat me? Rather you should discuss questions with me, philosophy, the arts—"

The Captain stood up. "Philosophy. It might interest you to know that we will be hard put to find something to eat for the next month. An unfortunate spoilage—"

"I know." The wub nodded. "But wouldn't it be more in accord with your principles of democracy if we all drew straws, or something along that line? After

all, democracy is to protect the minority from just such infringements. Now, if each of us casts one vote—"

The Captain walked to the door.

"Nuts to you," he said. He opened the door. He opened his mouth.

He stood frozen, his mouth wide, his eyes staring, his fingers still on the knob.

The wub watched him. Presently it padded out of the room, edging past the Captain. It went down the hall, deep in meditation.

THE room was quiet.

"So you see," the wub said, "we have a common myth. Your mind contains many familiar myth symbols. Ishtar, Odysseus—"

Peterson sat silently, staring at the floor. He shifted in his chair.

"Go on," he said. "Please go on."

"I find in your Odysseus a figure common to the mythology of most self-conscious races. As I interpret it, Odysseus wanders as an individual, aware of himself as such. This is the idea of separation, of separation from family and country. The process of individuation."

"But Odysseus returns to his home." Peterson looked out the port window, at the stars, endless stars, burning intently in the empty universe. "Finally he goes home."

"As must all creatures. The moment of separation is a temporary period, a brief journey of the soul. It begins, it ends. The wanderer returns to land and race. . . ."

The door opened. The wub stopped, turning its great head.

Captain Franco came into the room, the men behind him. They hesitated at the door.

"Are you all right?" French said.

"Do you mean me?" Peterson said, surprised. "Why me?"

Franco lowered his gun. "Come over here," he said to Peterson. "Get up and come here."

There was silence.

"Go ahead," the wub said. "It doesn't matter."

Peterson stood up. "What for?"

"It's an order."

Peterson walked to the door. French caught his arm.

"What's going on?" Peterson wrenched loose. "What's the matter with you?"

Captain Franco moved toward the wub.

The wub looked up from where it lay in the corner, pressed against the wall.

"It is interesting," he wub said, "that you are obsessed with the idea of eating me. I wonder why."

"Get up," Franco said.

"If you wish." The wub rose, grunting. "Be patient. It is difficult for me." It stood, gasping, its tongue lolling foolishly.

"Shoot it now," French said.

"For God's sake!" Peterson exclaimed. Jones turned to him quickly, his eyes gray with fear.

"You didn't see him—like a statue, standing there, his mouth open. If we hadn't come down, he'd still be there."

"Who? The Captain?" Peterson stared around. "But he's all right now."

They looked at the wub, standing in the middle of the room, its great chest rising and falling.

"Come on," Franco said. "Out of the way."

The men pulled aside toward the door.

"You are quite afraid, aren't you?" the wub said. Have I done anything to you? I am against the idea of hurting. All I have done is try to protect myself. Can you expect me to rush eagerly to my death? I am a sensible being like yourselves. I was curious to see your ship, learn about you. I suggested to the native—"

The gun jerked.

"See," Franco said. "I thought so."

The wub settled down, panting. It put its paw out, pulling its tail around it.

"It is very warm," the wub said. "I understand that we are close to the jets. Atomic power. You have done many wonderful things with it—technically. Apparently, your scientific heirarchy is not equipped to solve moral, ethical—"

Franco turned to the men, crowding behind him, wide-eyed, silent.

"I'll do it. You can watch."

French nodded. "Try to hit the brain. It's no good for eating. Don't hit the chest. If the rib cage shatters, we'll have to pick bones out."

"Listen," Peterson said, licking his lips. "Has it done anything? What harm has it done? I'm asking you. And anyhow, it's still mine. You have no right to shoot it. It doesn't belong to you."

Franco raised his gun.

"I'm going out," Jones said, his face white and sick. "I don't want to see it."

"Me, too," French said. The men straggled out, murmuring. Peterson lingered at the door.

"It was talking to me about myths," he said. "It wouldn't hurt anyone."

He went outside.

Franco walked toward the wub. The wub looked up slowly. It swallowed.

"A very foolish thing," it said. "I am sorry that you want to do it. There was a parable that your Saviour related—"

It stopped, staring at the gun.

"Can you look me in the eye and do it?" the wub said. "Can you do that?"

The Captain gazed down. "I can look you in the eye," he said. "Back on the farm we had hogs, dirty razor-back hogs. I can do it."

Staring down at the wub, into the gleaming, moist eyes, he pressed the trigger.

THE taste was excellent.

They sat glumly around the table, some of them hardly eating at all. The only one who seemed to be enjoying himself was Captain Franco.

"More?" he said, looking around. "More? And some wine, perhaps."

"Not me," French said. "I think I'll go back to the chart room."

"Me, too," Jones stood up, pushing his chair back. "I'll see you later."

The Captain watched them go. Some of the others excused themselves.

"What do you suppose the matter is?" the Captain said. He turned to Peterson. Peterson sat staring down at his plate, at the potatoes, the green peas, and at the thick slab of tender, warm meat.

He opened his mouth. No sound came.

The Captain put his hand on Peterson's shoulder.

"It is only organic matter, now," he said. "The life essence is gone." He ate, spooning up the gravy with some bread. "I, myself, love to eat. It is one of the greatest things that a living creature can enjoy. Eating, resting, meditation, discussing things."

Peterson nodded. Two more men got up and went out. The Captain drank some water and sighed.

"Well," he said. "I must say that this was a very enjoyable meal. All the reports I had heard were quite true—the taste of wub. Very fine. But I was prevented from enjoying this pleasure in times past."

He dabbed at his lips with his napkin and leaned back in his chair. Peterson stared dejectedly at the table.

The Captain watched him intently. He leaned over.

"Come, come," he said. "Cheer up! Let's discuss things."

He smiled.

"As I was saying before I was interrupted, the role of Odysseus in the myths—"

Peterson jerked up, staring.

"To go on," the Captain said. "Odysseus, as I understand him—"





BRIDE OF THE DARK ONE

By FLORENCE VERBELL BROWN

The outcasts; the hunted of all the brighter worlds, crowded onto Yaroto. But even here was there salvation for Ransome, the jinx-scarred acolyte, when tonight was the night of Bani-tai . . . the night of expiation by the photo-memoried priests of dark Darion?

THE last light in the Galaxy was a torch. High in the rafters of Mytor's Cafe Yaroto it burned, and its red glare illuminated a gallery of the damned. Hands that were never far from blaster or

knife; eyes that picked a hundred private hells out of the swirling smoke where a woman danced.

She was good to look at, moving in time to the savage rhythm of the music. The

single garment she wore bared her supple body, and thighs and breasts and a cloud of dark hair wove a pattern of desire in the close room.

Fat Mytor watched, and his little crafty eyes gleamed. The Earth-girl danced like a she-devil tonight. The tables were crowded with the outcast and the hunted of all the brighter worlds. The woman's warm body, moving in the torchlight, would stir memories that men had thought they left light years behind. Gold coins would shower into Mytor's palm for bad wine, for stupor and forgetfulness.

Mytor sipped his imported amber kali, and the black eyes moved with seeming casualness, penetrating the deep shadows where the tables were, resting briefly on each drunken, greedy or fear-ridden face.

It was an old process with Mytor, nearly automatic. A glance told him enough, the state of a man's mind and senses and wallet. This trembling wreck, staring at the woman and nursing a glass of the cheapest green Yarotian wine, had spent his last silver. Mytor would have him thrown out. Another, head down and muttering over a tumbler of raw whiskey, would pass out before the night was over, and wake in an alley blocks away, with his gold in Mytor's pocket. A third wanted a woman, and Mytor knew what kind of a woman.

When the dance was nearly over Mytor heaved out of his chair, drew the rich folds of his native Venusian tarab about his bulk, and padded softly to a corner of the room, where the shadows lay deepest. Smiling, he rested a moist, jeweled paw on the table at which Ransome, the Earthman, sat alone.

Blue eyes looked up coldly out of a weary, lean face. The voice was bored.

"I've paid for my bottle and I have nothing left for you to steal. We have nothing in common, no business together. Now, if you don't mind, you're in my line of vision, and I'd like to watch the finish of the dance."

The fat Venusian's smile only broadened. "May I sit down, Mr. Ransome?" he persisted. "Here, out of your line of vision?"

"The chair belongs to you," Ransome observed flatly.

"Thank you."

Covertly, as he had done for hours now,

Mytor studied the gaunt, pale Earthman in the worn space harness. Ransome had apparently dismissed the Venusian renegade already, and his cold blue eyes followed the woman's every movement with fixed intensity.

The music swept on toward its climax and the woman's body was a storm of golden flesh and tossing black hair. Mytor saw the Earthman's pale lips twist in the faint suggestion of a bitter smile, saw the long fingers tighten around the glass.

Every man had his price on Yaroto, and Ransome would not be the first Mytor had bought with a woman. For a moment, Mytor watched the desire brighten in Ransome's eyes, studied the smile that some men wear on the way to death, in the last moment when life is most precious.

IN THIS moment Ransome was for sale. And Mytor had a proposition.

"You were not surprised that I knew your name, Mr. Ransome?"

"Let's say that I wasn't interested."

Mytor flushed but Ransome was looking past him at the woman. The Venusian wiped his forehead with a soiled handkerchief, drummed fat fingers on the table for a moment, tried a different tack.

"Her name is Irene. She's lovely, isn't she, Mr. Ransome? Surely the inner worlds showed you nothing like her. The eyes, the red mouth, the breasts like—"

"Shut up," Ransome grated, and the glass shattered between his clenched fingers.

"Very well, Mr. Ransome." Whiskey trickled from the edge of the table in slow, thick drops, staining Mytor's white tarab. Ice was in the Venusian's voice. "Get out of my place—now. Leave the whiskey, and the woman. I have no traffic with fools."

Ransome sighed.

"I've told you, Mytor that you're wasting your time. But make your pitch, if you must."

"Ah, Mr. Ransome, you do not care to go out into the starless night. Perhaps there are those who wait for you, eh? With very long knives?"

Reflex brought Ransome's hand up in a lightning arc to the blaster holstered under his arm, but Mytor's damp hand was on his wrist, and Mytor's purr was in his ear, the words coming quickly.

"You would die where you sit, you fool. You would not live even to know the sharpness of the long knives, the sacred knives of Darion, with the incantations inscribed upon their blades against blasphemers of the Temple."

Ransome shuddered and was silent. He saw Mytor's guards, vigilant in the shadows, and his hand fell away from the blaster.

When the dance was ended, and the blood was running hot and strong in him, he turned to face Mytor. His voice was impatient now, but his meaning was shrouded in irony.

"Are you trying to sell me a lucky charm, Mytor?"

The Venusian laughed.

"Would you call a space ship a lucky charm, Mr. Ransome?"

"No," Ransome said grimly. "If it were berthed against the street I'd be dead before I got halfway to it."

"Not if I provided you with a guard of my men."

"Maybe not. But I wouldn't have picked you for a philanthropist, Mytor."

"There are no philanthropists on Yaroto, Mr. Ransome. I offer you escape, it is true; you will have guessed that I expect some service in return."

"Get to the point." Ransome's eyes were weary now that the woman's dancing no longer held them. And there was little hope in his voice.

A man can put off a date across ten years, and across a hundred worlds, and there can be whiskey and women to dance for him. But there was a ship with burned-out jets lying in the desert outside this crumbling city, and it was the night of Bani-tai, the night of expiation in distant Darion, and Ransome knew that for him, this was the last world.

After tonight the priests would proclaim the start of a new Cycle, and the old debts, if still unpaid, would be canceled forever.

Ransome shrugged, a hopeless gesture. Enough of the cult of the Dark One lingered in the very stuff of his nerves and brain to tell him that the will of the Temple would be done.

But Mytor was speaking again, and Ransome listened in spite of himself.

"All the scum of the Galaxy wash up on Yaroto at last," the fat Venusian said.

"That is why you and I are here, Mr. Ransome. It is also why a certain pirate landed his ship on the desert out there three days ago. *Callisto Queen*, the ship's name is, though it has borne a dozen others. Cargo—Jovian silks and dyestuffs from the moons of Mars, narco-vin from the system of Alpha Centauri."

Mytor paused, put the tips of fat fingers together, and looked hard at Ransome.

"Is all of that supposed to mean something to me?" Ransome asked. A waiter had brought over a glass to replace the broken one, and he poured a drink for himself, not inviting Mytor. "It doesn't."

"It suggests a course, nothing more. In toward Sol, out to Yaroto by way of Alpha Centauri. Do you follow the courses of pirate ships, Mr. Ransome?"

"One," Ransome said savagely. "I've lost track of her."

"Perhaps you know the *Callisto Queen* better under her former name, then."

Again Ransome's hand moved toward the blaster, and this time Mytor made no attempt to stop him. Ransome's thin lips tightened with some powerful emotion, and he half rose to look hard at Mytor.

"The name of the ship?"

"Her captain used to call her *Hawk of Darion*."

Ransome understood. *Hawk of Darion*, hell ship driving through black space under the command of a man he had once sworn to kill. Eight years rolled back and he saw them together, laughing at him: the Earthman-captain and the woman who had been Ransome's.

"Captain Jareth," Ransome said slowly. "Here—on Yaroto."

The Venusian nodded, pushing the bottle toward Ransome. The Earthman ignored the gesture.

"Is the woman with him?"

Mytor smiled his feline smile. "You would like to see her blood run under the knives of the priests, no?"

"No."

Ransome meant it. Somewhere, in the years of flight, he had lost his love for the blonde, red-lipped Dura-ki, and with it had gone his bitter hatred and his desire for revenge.

He jerked his mind back to the present, to Mytor.

"And if I told you that it must be her life or yours?" Mytor was asking him.

Ransome's eyes widened. He sensed that Mytor's last question was not an idle one. He leaned forward and asked:

"How do you fit into this at all, Mytor?"

"Easily. Once, ten years ago, you and the woman now aboard the *Hawk of Darion* blasphemed together against the Temple of the Dark One, in Darion."

"Go on," Ransome said.

"When you landed here this afternoon the avenging priests were not far behind you."

"How did you—"

"I have many contacts," Mytor purred. "I find them invaluable. But you are growing impatient, Mr. Ransome. I will be brief. I have contracted with the priests of Darion to deliver you to them tonight for a considerable sum."

"How did you know you would find me?"

"I was given your description." He made a gesture that took in all the occupants of the torch-lit room. "So many of the hunted, and the haunted, come here to forget for an hour the things that pursue them. I was expecting you, Mr. Ransome."

"If there is a large sum of money involved, I'm sure you'll make every effort to carry out your part of the bargain," Ransome observed ironically.

"I am a businessman, it is true. But in my dealings with the master of the *Hawk of Darion* I have seen the woman and I have heard stories. It occurred to me that the priests would pay much more for the woman than they would for you, and it seemed to me that a message from you might coax her off the ship. After all, when one has been in love—"

"That's enough." Ransome had risen to his feet. "I wonder if I could kill you before your guards got to me."

"Are you then so in love with death, Ransome?" The Venusian spoke quickly. "Don't be a fool. It is a small thing, a woman's life—a woman who has betrayed you."

Ransome stood silent, his arm halfway to his blaster. The woman had begun to dance again in the red glare of the torch.

"There will be other women," the Venusian was murmuring. "The woman who dances now, I will give her to you,

to take with you in your new ship."

Ransome looked slowly from the glowing body of the woman to the guards around the walls, down into Mytor's confident face. His arm dropped away from the blaster.

"Any man—for a price." The Venusian's murmur was lost in the blare of the music. Ransome had eased his lean body back into the chair.

THE night air was cold against Ransome's cheek when he went out an hour later, surrounded by Mytor's men. Yaroto's greenish moon was overhead now, but its pale light did not help him to see more clearly. It only made shadows in every doorway and twisting alley.

Mytor's car was only a few feet away but before he could reach it he was shoved aside by one of the Venusian's guards. At the same moment the night flamed with the blue-yellow glare from a dozen blasters. Ransome raised his own weapon, staring into the shadows, seeking his attackers.

"That's our job. Get in," said one of the guards, wrenching open the car door.

Then the firing was over as suddenly as it had begun. The guards clustered at the opening of an alley down the street. Mytor's driver sat impassively in the front seat.

When the guards returned one of them thrust something at Ransome, something hard and cold. He glanced at it. A long knife.

There was no need to read the inscription on the hilt. He knew it by heart.

"Death to him who defileth the Bed of the Dark One. Life to the Temple and City of Darion."

Once Ransome would have pocketed the knife as a kind of grim keepsake. Now he only let it fall to the floor.

In the brief, ghostly duel just over he had neither seen nor heard his attackers. That added, somehow, to the horror of the thing.

He shrugged off the thought, turning his mind to the details of the plan by which he would save his life.

It was quite simple. Ransome had been in space long enough to know where the crewmen went on a strange world. Half an hour later he sat with a gunner from the *Hawk of Darion*, in one of the gaudy pleasure houses clustered on the fringe of

the city near the spaceport and the desert beyond.

"Will you take the note to the Captain's woman?"

The man squirmed, avoiding Ransome's ice-blue stare.

"Captain killed the last man who looked at his woman," the gunner muttered sullenly. "Flogged him to death."

"I'm not asking you to look at her," Ransome reminded him.

The gunner sat looking at the stack of Mytor's money piled on the table before him. A woman drifted over.

"Go away," Ransome said, without raising his eyes. He added another bill to the stack.

"Let me see the note before I take it," the gunner demanded.

"It would mean nothing to you." Ransome pushed a half-empty bottle toward the man, poured him out another drink.

The man's hands were trembling with inner conflict as he measured the killing lash against the stack of yellow Yarotian kiroons, and the pleasures it would buy him. He drank, dribbling a little of the wine down his grimy chin, and then returned to the subject of seeing the note, with drunken persistence.

"I got to see it first."

"It's in a language you wouldn't—"

"Let him see it," a new voice cut in. "Translate it for him, Mr. Ransome."

IT WAS a woman's voice, cold and contemptuous. Ransome looked up quickly, and at first he didn't recognize her. The gunner never took his eyes from the stack of kiroons on the table.

"Let him see how a man murders a woman to save his own neck."

"You're supposed to be dancing at Mytor's place," Ransome said. "That's your business; this is mine."

He closed his hand over the gunner's wrist as the man reached convulsively for the money, menaced now by the angry woman.

"Half now, the rest later." Ransome's eyes burned into the crewman's. The latter looked away. Ransome tightened his grip, and pain contorted the gunner's features.

"Look at me," Ransome said. "If you cross me you'll wish you could die by flogging."

The woman Mytor had called Irene was still standing by the table when the gunner had left with the note and his money.

"Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

"Certainly. Sit down."

"I'd like a drink."

She sipped her wine in silence and Ransome studied her by the flickering light of the candle burning on the table between them.

She wore a simple street dress now, in contrast to the gaudy, revealing garments of the pleasure house women. The beauty of her soft, unpainted lips, her golden skin and wide-set green eyes was more striking now, seen at close range, than it had been in the smoky cavern of Mytor's place.

"What are you thinking now, Ransome?"

The question was unexpected, and Ransome answered without forethought: "The Temple."

"You studied for the priesthood of the Dark One yourself."

"Did Mytor tell you that?"

Irene nodded. The candlelight gave luster to her dark hair and revealed the contours of her high, firm breasts.

Ransome's pulse speeded up just looking at her. Then he saw that she was regarding him as if he were something crawling in damp stone, and there was bitterness in him.

"There are things that even Mytor doesn't know, even omniscient Mytor—"

He checked himself.

"Well?"

"Nothing."

"You were going to tell me about how you are really a very honorable man. Why don't you? You have an hour before it will be time to betray the woman from the *Hawk of Darion*."

Ransome shrugged, and his voice returned her mockery.

"If I told you that I had been an acolyte in the Temple of the Dark One, and that I was condemned to death for blasphemy, committed for love of a woman, would you like me better?"

"I might."

"Ten years ago," Ransome said. He talked, and the mighty walls of the Temple reared themselves around his mind, and the music of the pleasure house became the chanting of the priests at the high altar.

HE STOOD at the rear of the great Temple, and he had the tonsure and the black robes, and his name was not Ransome, but Ra-sed.

He had almost forgotten his Terran name. Forgotten, too, were his parents, and the laboratory ship that had been his home until the crash landing that had left him an orphan and Ward of the Temple.

Red candles burned before the high altar, but terror began just beyond their flickering light. It was dark where Ra-sed stood, and he could hear the cries of the people in the courtyard outside, and feel the trembling of the pillars, the very pillars of the Temple, and the groaning of stone on massive stone in the great, shadowed arches overhead. Above all, the chanting before the altar of the Dark One, rising, rising toward hysteria.

And then, like a knife in the darkness, the scream, and the straining to see which of the maidens the sacred lots cast before the altar had chosen; and the sudden, sick knowledge that it was Dura-ki. Dura-ki, of the soft golden hair and bright lips.

In stunned silence, Ra-sed, acolyte, listened to the bridal chant of the priests; the ancient words of the Dedication to the Dark One.

The chant told of the forty times forty flights of onyx steps leading downward behind the great altar to the dwelling place of the Dark One and of the forty terrible beasts couched in the pit to guard His slumber.

In the beginning, Dalir, the Sire, God of the Mists, had gone down wrapped in a sea fog, and had stolen the Sacred Fire while the Dark One slept. All life in Darion had come from Dalir's mystic union with the Sacred Fire.

Centuries passed before a winter of bitter frosts came, and the Dark One awakened cold in His dwelling place and found the Sacred Fire stolen. His wrath moved beneath the city then, and Darion crashed in shattered ruin and death.

Those who were left had hurled a maiden screaming into the greatest of the clefts in the earth, that the bed of the Idol might be warmed by an ember of the stolen Fire. Later, they had raised His awful Temple on the spot.

So it had been, almost from the beginning. When the pillars of the Temple

shook, a maiden was chosen by the Sacred Lots to go down as a bride to the Dark One, lest He destroy the city and the people.

The chant had come to an end. The legend had been told once more.

They led her forth then—Dura-ki, the chosen one. Shod in golden sandals, and wearing the crimson robe of the ritual, she moved out of Ra-sed's sight, behind the high altar. No acolyte was permitted to approach that place.

The chanting was a thing of wild delirium now, and Ra-sed placed a cold hand to steady himself against a trembling pillar. He heard the drawing of the ancient bolts, the booming echo as the great stone was drawn aside, and he closed his eyes, as though that could shut out the vision of the monstrous pit.

But his ears he could not close, and he heard the scream of Dura-ki, his own betrothed, as they threw her to the Idol.

AT THE table in the Yarotian pleasure house, Ransome's thin lips were pale. He swallowed his drink.

The woman opposite him was nearly forgotten now, and when he went on, it was for himself, to rid himself of things that had haunted him down all the bleak worlds to his final night of betrayal and death. His eyes were empty, fixed on another life. He did not see the change that crossed Irene's face, did not see the cold contempt fade away, to be replaced slowly with understanding. She leaned forward, lips slightly parted, to hear the end of his story.

For the love of golden-haired Dura-ki, the acolyte, Ra-sed, had gone down into the pit of the Dark one, where no mortal had gone before, except as a sacrifice.

He had hidden himself in the gloom of the pillars when the others left in chanting procession after the ceremony. Now he was wrenching at the rusted bolts that held the stone in place. It seemed to him that the rumbling grew in the earth beneath his feet and in the blackness of the vaulting overhead. Terror was in him, for his blasphemy would bring death to Darion. But the vision of Dura-ki was in him too, giving strength to tortured muscles. The bolts came away with a metallic screech, piercing against the mutter of shifting stone.

He was turning to the heavy ring set in

the stone when he caught a glimmer of reflected light in an idol's eye. Swiftly he crouched behind the great stone, waiting.

The priests came, two of them, bearing torches. Knives flashed as Ra-sed sprang, but he wrenched the blade from the hand of the first, buried it in the throat of the second. The man fell with a cry, but a stunning blow from behind sent Ra-sed sprawling across the fallen body. The other priest was on him, choking out his life.

The last torch fell, and Ra-sed twisted savagely, lashed out blindly with the long knife. There was a sound of rending cloth, a muttered curse in the darkness, and the fingers ground harder into Ra-sed's throat. Black tides washed over his mind, and he never remembered the second and last convulsive thrust of the knife that let out the life of the priest.

He did remember straining against the ring of the great stone. The echo boomed out for the second time that night, as the stone moved away at last, to lay bare the realm of the Dark One.

Bitterness touched Ransome's eyes as he spoke now, the bitterness of a man who has lost his God.

"There were no onyx steps, no monsters waiting beneath the stone. The legends were false."

Ransome turned his glass slowly, staring into its amber depths. Then he became aware of Irene, waiting for him to go on.

"I got her out," Ransome said shortly. "I went down into that stinking pit and I got Dura-ki out. The air was nearly unbreathable where I found her. She was unconscious on a ledge at the end of a long slope. Hell itself might have been in the pit that opened beneath it. A geologist would have called it a major fault, but it was hell enough. When I picked her up, I found the bones of all those others. . . ."

Irene's green eyes had lost their coldness. She let her hand rest on his for a moment. But her voice was puzzled.

"This Dura-ki—she is the woman on the *Hawk of Darion*?"

Ransome nodded. He stood up. His lips were a hard, thin line.

"My little story has an epilogue. Something not quite so romantic. I lived with Dura-ki in hiding near Darion for a year,

until a ship came in from space. A pirate ship, with a tall, good-looking Earthman for a master. I took passage for Dura-ki, and signed on myself as a crewman. A fresh start in a bright, new world." Ransome laughed shortly. "I'll spare you the details of that happy voyage. At the first port of call, on Jupiter, Dura-ki stood at the top of the gangway and laughed when her Captain Jareth had me thrown off the ship."

"She betrayed you for the master of the *Hawk of Darion*," Irene said softly.

"And tonight she'll pay," Ransome finished coldly. He threw down a few coins to pay for their drinks. "It's been pleasant telling you my pretty little story."

"Ransome, wait, I—"

"Forget it," Ransome said.

MYTOR'S car was waiting, and Ransome could sense the presence of the guards lurking in the dark, empty street.

"The spaceport," Ransome told his driver. "Fast."

He thought of the note he had given the crewman to deliver:

"Ra-sed would see his beloved a last time before he dies."

"Faster," Ransome grated, and the powerful car leapt forward into the night.

SHIPS, like the men who drove them, came to Yaroto to die. Three quarters of the spaceport was a vast jungle of looming black shapes, most of them awaiting the breaker's hammer. Ransome dismissed the car and threaded his way through the deserted yards with the certainty of a man used to the ugly places of a hundred worlds.

Mytor had suggested the meeting place, a hulk larger than most, a cruiser once in the fleet of some forgotten power.

Ransome had fought in the ships of half a dozen worlds. Now the ancient cruiser claimed his attention. Martian, by the cut of her rusted braking fins. Ransome tensed, remembering the charge of the Martian cruisers in the Battle of Phoebus. Since then he had called himself an Earthman, because, even if his parentage had not given him claim to that title already, a man who had been in the Earth ships at Phoebus had a right to it.

He was running a hand over the battered plate of a blast tube when Dura-ki found him. She was a smaller shadow moving among the vast, dark hulls. With a curious, dead feeling in him, Ransome stepped away from the side of the cruiser to meet her.

"Ra-sed, I could not let you die alone—"

Because her voice was a ghost from the past, because it stirred things in him that had no right to live after all the long years that had passed, Ransome acted before Dura-ki could finish speaking. He hit her once, hard, caught the crumpling body in his arms, and started back toward Mytor's car. If he remembered another journey in the blackness with this woman in his arms, he drove the memory back with the savage blasphemies of a hundred worlds.

ON THE rough floor of Mytor's place, Dura-ki stirred and groaned.

Ransome didn't like the way things were going. He hadn't planned to return to the Cafe Yaroto, to wait with Mytor for the arrival of the priests.

"There are a couple of my men outside," Mytor told him. "When the priests are spotted you can slip out through the rear exit."

"Why the devil do I have to be here now?"

"As I have told you, I am a businessman. Until I have turned the girl over to the priests I cannot be sure of my payment. This girl, as you know, is not without friends. If Captain Jareth knew that she was here he would tear this place apart, he and his crew. Those men have rather an impressive reputation as fighters, and while my guard here—"

"You've been drinking too much of your own rotten liquor, Mytor. Why should I try to save her at the eleventh hour? To hand her back to her lover?"

"I never drink my own liquor, Mr. Ransome." He took a sip of his kali in confirmation. "I have seen love take many curious shapes."

Ransome stood up. "Save your memoirs. I want a guard to get me to the ship you promised me. And I want it now."

Mytor did not move. The guards, ranged around the walls, stood silent but alert.

"Mytor."

"Yes, Mr. Ransome?"

"There isn't any ship. There never was."

The Venusian shrugged. "It would have been easier for you if you hadn't guessed. I'm really sorry."

"So you'll make a double profit on this deal. I was the bait for Dura-ki, and Irene was bait for me. You are a good businessman, Mytor."

"You are taking this rather better than I had expected, Mr. Ransome."

Ransome slumped down into his chair again. He felt no fear, no emotion at all. Somewhere, deep inside, he had known from the beginning that there would be no more running away after tonight, that the priests would have their will with him. Perhaps he had been too tired to care. And there had been Irene, planted by Mytor to fill his eyes, to make him careless and distracted.

He wondered if Irene had known of her role, or had been an unconscious tool, like himself. With faint surprise, he found himself hoping that she had not acted against him intentionally.

DURA-KI was unconscious when the priests came. She had looked at Ransome only once, and he had stared down at his hands.

Now she stood quietly between two of the black-robed figures, watching as others counted out gold coins into Mytor's grasping palm. Her eyes betrayed neither hope nor fear, and she did not shrink from the burning, fanatical stares of the priests, nor from their long knives. The pirate's consort was not the girl who had screamed in the dimness of the Temple when the Sacred Lots were cast.

A priest touched Ransome's shoulder and he started in spite of himself. He tried to steady himself against the sudden chill that seized him.

And then Dura-ki, who had called him once to blasphemy, now called him to something else.

"Stand up, Ra-sed. It is the end. The game is played out and we lose at last. It will not be worse than the pit of the Dark One."

Ransome got to his feet and looked at her. He no longer loved this woman but her quiet courage stirred him.

With an incredibly swift lunge he was on the priest who stood nearest Dura-ki.

The man reeled backward and struck his skull against the wall. It was a satisfying sound, and Ransome smiled tightly, a half-forgotten oath of Darion on his lips.

He grabbed the man by the throat, spun him around, and sent him crashing into another.

A knife slashed at him, and he broke the arm that held it, then sprang for the door while the world exploded in blaster fire.

Dura-ki moved toward him. He wrenched at the door, felt the cold night air rush in. A hand clawed at the girl's shoulder, but Ransome freed her with a hard, well-aimed blow.

When she was outside, Ransome fought to give her time to get back to the *Hawk of Darion*. Also, he fought for the sheer joy of it. The air in his lungs was fresh again, and the taste of treachery was out of his mouth.

It took all of Mytor's guards and the priests to overpower him, but they were too late to save Mytor from the knife that left him gasping out his life on the floor.

Ransome did not struggle in the grip of the guards. He stood quietly, waiting.

"Your death will not be made prettier by what you have done," a priest told him. The knife was poised.

"That depends on how you look at it," Ransome answered.

"Does it?"

"Absolutely," a hard, dry voice answered from the doorway.

Ransome turned his head and had a glimpse of Irene. With her, a blaster level in his hand, and his crew at his back, was Captain Jareth. It was he who had answered the priest's last question.

Mytor had said that Jareth's crew had an impressive reputation as fighters, and he lived just long enough to see the truth of

his words. The priests and the guards went down before the furious attack of the men from the *Hawk of Darion*. Ransome fought as one of them.

When it was over, it was not to Captain Jareth that he spoke, but to Irene.

"Why did you do this? You didn't know Dura-ki, and you despised me."

"At first I did. That's why I agreed to Mytor's plan. But when I had spoken to you, I felt differently. I—"

Jareth came over then, holstering his blaster. Irene fell silent.

The big spaceman shifted uneasily, then spoke to Ransome.

"I found Dura-ki near here. She told me what you did."

Ransome shrugged.

"I sent her back to the ship with a couple of my men."

Abruptly, Jareth turned and stooped over the still form of Mytor. From the folds of the Venusian's stained tarab he drew a ring of keys. He tossed them to Ransome.

"This will be the first promise that Mytor ever kept."

"What do you mean?"

"Those are the keys to his private ship. I'll see that you get to it."

It was Irene who spoke then. "That wasn't all that Mytor promised him."

The two men looked at her in surprise. Then Ransome understood.

"Will you come with me, Irene?" he asked her.

"Where?" Her eyes were shining, and she looked very young.

Ransome smiled at her. "The Galaxy is full of worlds. And even the Dark One cancels his debts when the night of Bani-tai is over."

"Let's go and look at some of those worlds," Irene said.



FROZEN HELL

By JOHN JAKES

Their task was to bring back the remains of the heroic explorer from the frozen wastes of Pluto. But the ice-thing they found was beyond posthumous honors . . . beyond the ken of man.

STRICKLAND found the formation on the second day after the landing. He and Rogers had struck out from the ship in opposite directions, armed with ice torches and heavy electric clothing. They comprised only one team of the great search party combing the frozen face of Pluto for the body of the man who had explored the outer planets nearly a century before.

The formation was an almost transparent wall of ice, lying at one end of a small frozen canyon. The snow filtered down from the constantly dark purplish sky, and even though the heating unit in his suit buzzed faintly, generating warmth, Strickland felt a cold wave pass down his back. He shined his torch at the wall and peered through the snow, vague expectation filling him. Far back, behind perhaps ten feet of ice, he could see the outline of a figure, vaguely human.

Milgrim? he wondered. Clyde Starr Milgrim, the first explorer beyond Venus in the early days of the tin ships and the rickety chemical drives? Milgrim had disappeared on the surface of Pluto, with no locations received over the scrambled waves on the Communications Sets back on Earth.

Now, nearly a century later, the Milgrim Scientific Foundation had raised enough money to send out search parties in an attempt to find some remains of the man or his ship and carry them home to Earth for fitting burial. Strickland felt a peculiarly acute kinship with the cause. His grandfather had ridden Milgrim's first ship, *The Black Star*, out into the uncharted darkness beyond Venus.

But it could not be Milgrim locked within the ice, Strickland reasoned. The figure outlined in frozen patterns of blue shadows was huge and grotesque and misshapen,

nearly a dozen feet tall with a head that appeared bulbous and lopsided, Strickland could not make out the face.

He debated the idea of cutting into the ice with his torch. Even if it wasn't Milgrim, it was a human shape, and that was certainly worth something. He approached the ice wall and chipped away a chunk, peering at it in the twilight.

The ice was not perfectly crystalline as he had first thought. Black irregular masses, three or four inches in diameter, were scattered through it. They presented a new problem. He tucked the ice into the sealed pouch at his hip and headed back to the rocket.

ROGERS sat in the lab room waiting for him. He looked up morosely when Strickland entered. "Find anything?" he asked. His tone made it apparent that he had not.

Strickland threw off his insulated hood, nodding. He jabbed a cigarette into his mouth, drew the warming smoke into his lungs and put the pouch on the table.

"I think so," he said. "About a mile from here in a canyon. There's something frozen in a wall of ice. The shape's human."

Rogers jumped up. "My God, Harry! Is it Milgrim's body?"

Strickland shook his head. "It can't be. The thing's all out of proportion. Big head and body. Looks like some kind of freak. I was going to cut into the ice but the stuff didn't look quite right. I brought back a piece for you to take a look at. It's in the pouch."

Eagerly, Rogers pulled the pouch open and removed the ice.

"The black things are what got me," Strickland said. He sat down tiredly while

Rogers flipped on the fluorescents over his lab bench and began melting the ice.

They sat in silence for long minutes while Rogers worked steadily. Strickland smoked, listening to the whine of the wind on the hull plates. They were alone in the wasteland, miles from another search team. And the shape . . . that was all he could call it . . . the shape mocked their hunt. The people of Earth wanted Milgrim's remains for a memorial. That was only fitting.

Strickland had hoped that they would be the ones to find the great man's body. The chance had been small, of course, and identification after a hundred years would have been almost impossible. The only lasting thing about the remains would have been the three artificial metal fingers on the left hand. Milgrim had lost the real ones tinkering with the chemical motors of one of his ships.

Rogers worked for almost forty minutes. When he finally turned away from the bench, his face showed a troubled frown.

"Harry, this is crazy stuff."

"What's wrong?" Strickland bent over the table.

Rogers pointed at one of the small black bodies, rubbery-looking, with a slimy outer coating. "I took this thing out of the ice. You know what it is?"

"No."

"Well . . ." Rogers shook his head. "Honest to God, Harry, you've got to believe me. I'd stake every hour of biochemistry I ever took on it . . ."

"Tell me!" Strickland said irritably.

"It's a gland, an endocrine gland, almost like the ones in human bodies, right there in the middle of the ice. And it was secreting stuff through these little pores in the ice. I got a look at them before the stuff melted."

"Secreting?" Strickland said amazedly.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"But how?"

Rogers shrugged. "Don't ask me. Nobody's looked at the ice on Pluto before. The thing probably isn't exactly identical with the human gland but it's damned close. And you know what it's secreting?"

Strickland waited.

Rogers said very quietly, "A hormone resembling the Growth Hormone in the human pituitary. It regulates growth, and if

there's too little of it or too much it can turn people into dwarfs or . . ." He stared hard at Strickland, ". . . giants."

Strickland swallowed, his mouth dry and flat-tasting. He closed his eyes and steadied himself against the bench. His voice whispered thinly in the bright sterile room. "Maybe . . . maybe he got caught in there . . . frozen . . . and the stuff . . . changed him . . ."

"Milgrim?"

Strickland swallowed again. "Yes."

Without a word they bundled themselves into their heavy suits and set out for the canyon. Strickland felt sickness rising in him. That the quest for a man who had been almost a god to the civilized worlds should end in the finding of a deformed monster caught in a block of chemically functioning ice was unendurable. But they had their orders.

It took them three hours, working carefully with the torches, to cut the body out of the ice in the form of a rough block. Every so often they encountered bits of metal ribbing, fragments of machinery, embedded through the ice.

Apparently Milgrim's ship had fallen from the sky and broken apart when the canyon was less glacial. The ice had moved down and covered the body, somehow miraculously unbroken. The body had been preserved intact and surrounded by the strange glacial ice that moved over the face of this cold twilight world.

THEY loaded the block onto an electric dolly and took it back to the ship. Rogers rigged a set of pulleys and they hoisted it into the freeze locker. Finally Strickland mustered enough nerve to turn on the lights.

The two men stood in the eerie brilliance coming from the ceiling and stared down at the figure imbedded in the black-spotted ice. It was Milgrim. There was no mistaking that. The features were pulled out of shape, monstrously contorted, but they were still recognizable. The elongated misshapen limbs carried an alien air about them, but Strickland and Rogers both caught the dull gleam of three metal fingers on a left hand.

Finally Strickland turned away, retching.

After a minute he said, "Let's get out of here."

They sat in the control cabin for a few minutes, letting the sick feeling work its way free of their bodies. At last Rogers said, "We've got to take it back. I . . . just can't say *be*. Milgrim was such a damned great man . . . I . . ." He choked again.

Strickland stirred himself reluctantly and began adjusting the fuel controls regulating the atomic pile unit in the rear of the ship. He talked as he worked in an empty disillusioned voice.

"I just don't want to take that thing back to Earth, Milgrim was an ideal. You can't throw an ideal in people's faces and say, look, this is what happened to him. They'll lose everything that ever had meaning where he's concerned. They'll lose everything that was really good in what he did."

"We've got our orders . . ." Rogers began dully.

"I know, I know. That's what makes me so damned sick."

"Are we going to contact any of the other teams and tell them?"

"No," said Strickland. "We'll head out of here on our own."

He jerked a series of levers with quick, nervous motions and the tiny rocket shuddered as the jets sprang to life. A moment later, the ship lifted from the snow and Strickland watched the icy landscape fall away.

Milgrim was a man of the ships, Strickland kept thinking. A great man, A man who was drawn to the ships and what they represented during his whole life. The ship and the engine made man capable of reaching out, of searching for something new. The ship, the engine. They made the dream possible. The ship, the engine. They were carrying the monster home to shatter forever the ideals the great man created.

The ship kept rising through the snow and the dark. Strickland sat at the controls, head buried on his arms. Rogers watched the dials for him. Neither man spoke.

Strickland began to sweat. He had not taken off his heavy suit, and the atomic heat had begun to penetrate the metal walls. The insulation, while adequate, could not completely prevent a temperature change. The perspiration rolled down under his arms, cold and clammy. But he did not move.

Thirty minutes later they heard the first sound.

Rogers turned suddenly, staring at the wall in the direction of the rear of the ship. He swallowed loudly. "What . . . what the hell was that?"

"I don't know," Strickland breathed. "Maybe we'd better go see. It sounded . . ." He did not finish.

Rogers ran down the hall in the direction of the freeze locker. Strickland jerked open a wall cabinet and pulled out one of the large-barreled magnesium rifles just as Rogers threw back the door of the freeze locker.

Rogers vanished around the edge of the door. Strickland ran forward a few steps, the hairs on the back of his neck itching with fear. The scream tore through the ship, wild and raw-edged and insane, the scream of a man looking into the open face of complete and mind-shattering horror.

Strickland leaned against the wall, breathing hard. Clyde Starr Milgrim, the misshapen giant frozen in the ice, had begun to live again. The atomic heating systems of the ship, warming the walls, had melted ice even in the freeze locker as they often did. The sluggish life processes shut off a hundred years before were beginning once more. The wheels of life were turning in new mad patterns.

Rogers staggered out of the door, staring wildly at Strickland although his eyes were bloody red pockets and he could not see from them. His clothes were torn and shredded and a great wound was on his shoulder.

Rogers tottered in the hall. Strickland gaped at him, hearing only the faint whine of the atomics. Rogers opened his mouth and screamed once more. Then he murmured pitifully, took one step forward and collapsed on his face.

Strickland doubted that the magnesium rifle would kill the monster. There was only one safe refuge. His eyes frantically swung to the red door at the end of the hall.

The Pile Room.

HE BEGAN to run, and terror was in every nerve and fiber of his body. He did not look into the freeze locker as he ran past. But something touched his shoulder. He cried out, stumbling and running on with renewed energy. He slammed into the door at the end of the hall, backed off and jerked it open. In another moment he

was inside on the catwalk hanging above the bulky Kermit Pile Unit.

Hastily he turned to the wall and threw a lever. Two plates on the top of the pile slid back and chunks of metallic stuff slid down a feed chute into the gaping atomic maw. The fires, red-orange and blue, danced on the ceiling and the walls, hurting his eyes.

He looked around the door and down the hall. He was too frightened now to even think. Every action was one of instinct aimed to protect himself from the thing that even now staggered down the hall toward him.

The smell sickened his nostrils as the twisted thing that had once been the great Milgrim humped toward him, its mouth wide open, emitting childish whimpers, its monstrous knobby hands opening and closing.

It smells the pile, Strickland thought wildly. It's Milgrim, finding the heart of the ship, knowing where his power lies. It's Milgrim going to the engine. The frozen brain still remembers after a hundred years.

The monster staggered into the pile room. Strickland crouched against the wall, holding the magnesium rifle ready. Milgrim stumbled to the rail and stood peering down at the molten mouth of the pile.

Strickland fired the rifle.

The fire charge struck its back and it whirled, staring.

Strickland screamed.

For one brief moment the eyes were human, lucidly clear and full of understanding, mixed with vague sorrowful wonder. Another human had tried to kill it. The purplish lips hung open, the nostrils dilated, the hands quivered.

"Milgrim," Strickland shouted, "Milgrim. . . ."

The grotesque mouth opened and a sound came forth in a horrible travesty of human speech.

... "Yes. . . ."

Strickland fired again. The creature put its hands on its chest, trying to shield itself from the pain. Strickland kept firing. Finally, the force of the charges hurled the thing

backwards over the rail and it fell straight down into the mouth of the pile.

Strickland stared at the huge shape, writhing, screaming while the fiery brilliance licked over its body. He stumbled to the wall and shoved the lever, leaning weakly against the metal panels. He heard the plates slide back into place, closing the pile.

He walked slowly back down the hall. He stopped to put the corpse of Rogers in the freeze locker. Then he returned to the main control cabin. Beyond the windows the snow still fell, although it was thinning, as the ship neared outer space.

Strickland knew what he had to do. He could not return to Earth, he was certain of that. Above all, Clyde Starr Milgrim had to live in the memory of Earthmen as he did now. The monster whose ashes were being scattered through the snow and darkness from the pile jets would not be a thing to carry home to Earth.

Calmly now, feeling certain of himself, he fed the new direction tapes into the control panel. The course was set for Northern Mars. A wild frontier of civilization, with few Earthmen ever travelling that way. In a year or so the names of Rogers and Strickland would be stricken from the list of the living.

As the ship broke through the last fringes of snow into space, Strickland sank into the acceleration chair and leaned back wearily. He watched the mist break into pieces and shred away, and the black starred pattern of space formed before him.

It was right, he knew, utterly and finally right. Clyde Starr Milgrim's memorial would be in two places.

The first, in the minds of Earthmen.

The second, Strickland thought, was even more fitting. Even now Milgrim's ashes were scattering behind the ship, falling in a soft gray rain to drift forever in the dark space lanes which he has charted. Strickland knew that the memory of the creature from the ice would eventually wipe itself from his mind.

Space loomed before him. He eased himself deeper into the chair, thinking of the forgetfulness awaiting him on Mars.

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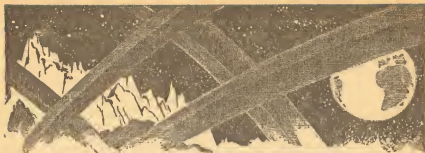
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MASTER of the MOONDOG

By STANLEY MULLEN

Idiotic pets rate idiotic masters. Tod Denver and Charley, the moondog, made ideal companions as they set a zigzag course for the Martian diggings—paradise for fools.

IT WAS Charley's fault, of course; all of it . . .

Temperature outside was a rough 280 degrees F., which is plenty rough and about three degrees cooler than Hell. It was somewhere over the Lunar Appenines and the sun bored down from an airless sky like an

unshielded atomic furnace. The thermal adjustors whined and snarled and clogged-up until the inside of the space sled was just bearable.

Tod Denver glared at Charley, who was a moondog and looked like one, and Charley glared back. Denver was fond of





Charley, as one might be of an idiot child. At the moment they found each in the other's doghouse. Charley had curled up and attached himself to the instrument panel from which he scowled at Denver in malignant fury.

Charley was a full-grown, two yard-long moon dog. He looked like an oversized comma of something vague and luminous. At the head end he was a fat yellow balloon, and the rest of him tapered vaguely to a blunt apex of infinity. Whatever odd forces composed his weird physiology, he was undoubtedly electronic or magnetic.

In the physically magnetic sense, he could cling for hours to any metallic surface, or at will propel himself about or hang suspended between any two or more metallic objects. As to his personality, he was equally magnetic, for wherever Denver took him he attracted curious stares and comments. Most people have never seen a moon dog. Such creatures, found only on the moons of Saturn, are too rare to be encountered often as household or personal pets.

But Tod Denver had won Charley in a crap game at Crystal City and thereafter found him both an inseparable companion and exasperating responsibility. He had tried every available means to get rid of Charley, but without success. Either direct sale or horse-trade proved useless. Charley liked Denver too well to put up with less interesting owners so Charley always came back, and nearly always accompanied by profanity and threats. Charley was spectacular, and a monstrous care but Denver ended by becoming fond of the nuisance. He would miss the radiant, stupid and embarrassingly affectionate creature.

Charley had currently burned out a transformer by some careless and exuberant antic; hence the mutual doghouse. Scolding was wasted effort, so Denver merely sighed and made a face at Charley.

"Mad dogs and Martians go out in the Lunar sun," he sang as a punishment. Charley recognized only the word "dog" but he considered the song a personal insult; as if Denver's singing were not sufficient punishment for a minor offense. Charley was irritated.

Charley's iridescence flickered evilly, which was enough to short-circuit two relays and weld an undetermined number of hot

switches. Charley's temper was short, and short-circuiting all electrical units within range was mere reflex.

Tod Denver swore nobly and fluently, set the controls on automatic-neutral and tried to localize the damage. But for Charley and his overloaded peeve, they would have been in Crystal City inside the hour.

So it was Charley's fault, of course; all of it . . .

IT WAS beyond mere prank. Denver calculated grimly that his insulated suit would hold up less than twenty minutes in that noon inferno outside before the stats fused and the suiting melted and ran off him in droplets of metal foil and glass cloth. The thermal adjustors were already working at capacity, transmitting the light and heat that filtered through the mirror-tone hull into stored, useful energy. Batteries were already overcharged and the voltage regulators snapped on and off like a crackling barrage of distant heat-guns.

Below was a high gulch of the Lunar Apennines, a pattern of dazzling glare and harsh moonshadows. Ramshackle mine-buildings of prefabricated plastic straggled out from the shrouding blackness under a pinnacled ridge. Denver eyed the forbidding terrain with hair-raising panic. He checked the speed of the racing space sled, circled once, and tried to pick out a soft spot. The ship swooped down like a falling rock, power off. Denver awaited the landing shock.

It was rough. Space was too cramped and he overshot his planned landing. The spacer set down hard beyond the cleared strip, raising spurting clouds of volcanic ash which showered his view-ports in blinding glare.

Skids shrilled on naked rock, causing painful vibrations in the cabin. Denver wrenched at controls, trying to avoid jagged tongues of broken lava protruding above the dust-floor. Sunfire turned the disturbed dust into luminous haze blanketing ship and making vision impossible. The spacer ground to an agonized stop. Denver's landing was rough but he still lived.

He sat blankly and felt cold in the superheated cabin. It was nice and surprising to be alive. Without sustaining air the dust settled almost instantly. Haze cleared outside the ports.

Charley whined eagerly. He detached himself from the tilting control panel and sailed wildly about like a hydrophobic goldfish in a bowl of water. A succession of spitting and crackling sounds poured from him as he batted his lunatic face to the viewports to peer outside. Pseudo-tendrils formed around his travesty of mouth, and he wrinkled his absurd face into yellow typhoons of excitement. This was fun. Let's do it again!

Denver grunted uncomfortably. He studied the staggering scene of Lunar landscape without any definite hope. Something blazing from the peak of the largest mine-structure caught his eye. With a snort of bitter disgust he identified the dazzle.

Distress signals in Interplanetary Code! That should be very helpful under the poisonous circumstances. He swore again, numbly, but with deep sincerity.

Charley danced and flicked around the cabin like a free electron with a careless disregard for traffic regulations and public safety. It was wordless effort to express his eagerness to go outside and explore with Denver.

In spite of himself, Tod Denver grinned at the display.

"Not this time, Charley. You wait in the ship while I take a quick look around. From the appearance of things, I'll run into trouble enough without help from you."

The moon dog drooped from disappointment. With Charley, any emotion always reached the ultimate absurdity. He was a flowing, flexible phantom of translucent color and radiance. But now the colors faded like gaudy rags in caustic solution. Charley whined as Denver went through the grotesque ritual of donning space helmet and zipping up his glass cloth and metal foil suiting before he dared venture outside. Charley even tried to help by pouring himself through the stale air to hold open the locker where the tool-belts and holstered heat guns were kept.

Space suiting bulged with internal pressure as Denver slid through the airlock and left the ship behind. Walking carefully against the treachery of moonweak gravity, he made cautious way up the slope toward the clustered buildings. Footing was bad, with the feeling of treading upon brittle, glassy surfaces and breaking through to

bury his weighted shoes in inches of soft ash. A small detour was necessary to avoid upthrusting pinnacles of lavarock. In the shadow of these outcroppings he paused to let his eyes adjust to the brilliance of sunlight.

A thin pencil-beam of light stabbed outward from behind the nearer building. Close at hand, one of the lava-needles vanished in soundless display of mushrooming explosion. Sharp, acrid heat penetrated even the insulating layers of suit. A pressure-wave of expanding gas staggered him before it dissipated.

Denver flung himself instinctively behind the sheltering rocks. Prone, he inched forward to peer cautiously through a V-cleft between two jagged spires. Heat-blaster in hand, he waited events.

Again the beam licked out. The huddle of lava-pinnacles became a core of flaming destruction. Half-molten rock showered Denver's precarious refuge. He ducked, unhurt, then thrust head and gun-arm above the barricade.

TWO dark figures, running awkwardly, detached themselves from the huddled bulk of buildings. Like leaping, fantastic shadows, they scampered toward the mounds of deep shadow beneath the ridge. The route took them away from Denver, making aim difficult. He fired twice, hurriedly. Missed. But near misses because he had not focused for such range.

By the time he could reset the weapon, the scurrying figures had disappeared into the screening puddles of shadow. Denver tried to distinguish them against the blackness, but it lay in solid, covering mass at the base of a titanic ridge. Faintly he could see a ghostly outline, much too large for men. It might be a ship, but it would have to be large enough for a space-yacht. No stinking two-man sled like his spacer. And he could not be sure in that eerie blankness if it even were a ship.

Besides, the range was too great. Uncertainty vanished as a circle of light showed briefly. An airlock door opened and closed swiftly. Denver stood clear of the rocks and wondered if he should risk anything further. Pursuit was useless with such arms as he carried. No question of courage was involved. A man is not required to play

quixotic fool under such circumstances. And there might not be time to return to his spacer for a long-range heat gun. If he tried to reach the strange ship, its occupants could smoke him down before he covered half the distance. If he continued toward the buildings, they might return and stalk him. They would, he knew, if they guessed he was alone.

Decision was spared him. Rockets thundered. The ridge lighted up as with magnesium flares. A big ship moved out of the banked shadows, accelerating swiftly. It was a space-yacht, black-hulled, and showed no insignia. It was fast, incredibly fast. He wasted one blaster charge after it, but missed focus by yards. He ducked out of sight among the rocks as the ship dipped to skim low overhead. Then it was gone, circling in stiff, steep spiral until it lost itself to sight in distant gorges.

"Close!" Denver murmured. "Too close. And now what?"

He quickly recharged the blaster. A series of sprawling leaps ate up the remaining distance to the mine's living quarters. One whole side, where airlock doors had been, was now a gaping, ragged hole. A haze of nearly invisible frost crystals still descended in slow showers. It was bitterly cold on the sharp, opaque edge of mountain-shadow. Thermal adjustors in his suiting stopped their irregular humming. Automatic units combined chemicals and began to operate against the biting cold. With a premonition of ugly dread, Denver clambered into the ruined building.

Inside was airless, heatless cell, totally dark. Denver's gloved hand sought a radi-lume-switch. Light blinked on as he fumbled the button.

Death sat at a metal-topped table. Death wore the guise of a tall, gaunt, leathery man, no longer young. It was no pretty sight, though not too unfamiliar a sight on Luna.

The man had been writing. Frozen fingers still clutched a cylinder pen, and the nub adhered to the paper as the flow of ink had stiffened. From nose, ears and mouth, streams of blood had congealed into fat, crimson icicles. Rimes of ruby crystals ringed pressure-bulged eyes. He was complete, perfect, a tableau of cold, airless death.

The paper was a claim record, registered

in the name of Laird Martin, Earthman. An attached photograph matched what could be seen of face behind its mask of frozen blood. Across the foot of the sheet was a hurried scrawl:

Claim jumpers. I know they'll get me. If I can hide this first, they will not get what they want. Where Mitre Peak's apex of shadow points at 2017 ET is the first of a series of deep-cut arrow markings. Follow. They lead to the entrance. Old Martian workings. Maybe something. Whoever finds this, see that my kid, Soleil, gets a share. She's in school on Earth. Address is 93-X south Palma—

The pen had stopped writing half-through the word. Death had intervened hideously. Imagination could picture the scene as that airlock wall disappeared in blinding, soundless flash. Or perhaps there had been sound in the pressured atmosphere. His own arrival may have frightened off the claim jumpers, but too late to help the victim, who sat so straight and hideous in the airless tomb.

There was nothing to do. Airless cold would embalm the body until some bored official could come out from Crystal City to investigate the murder and pick up the hideous pieces. But if the killers returned Denver made sure that nothing remained to guide them in their search for the secret mine worked long-ago by forgotten Martians. It was Laird Martin's discovery and his dying legacy to a child on distant Earth.

Denver picked up the document and wadded it clumsily into a fold-pocket of his spacesuit. It might help the police locate the heir. In Martin's billfold was the child's picture, no more.

Denver retraced his steps to the frosty airlock valve of his ship. Inside the cabin, Charley greeted his master's return with extravagant caperings which wasted millions of electron volts.

"Nobody home, Charley," Denver told the purring moonog, "but we've picked up a nasty errand to run."

It was a bad habit, he reflected; talking to a moonog like that, but he had picked up the habit from sheer loneliness of his prospecting among the haunted desolations of the Moon. Even talking to Charley was

better than going nuts, he thought, and there was not too much danger of smart answers.

He worked quickly, repairing the inadvertent damage Charley's pique had caused. It took ten full minutes, and the heat-deadline was too close for comfort. He finished and breathed more freely as temperatures began to drop. He peeled off the helmet and unzipped the suit which was reaching the thermal levels of a live-stream bath.

He ran tape through the charger to impregnate electronic setting that would guide the ship on its course to Crystal City. "We were on our way, there, anyhow," he mused. "I hope they've improved the jail. It could stand air-conditioning."

II

CRYSTAL CITY made up in violence what it lacked in size. It was a typical boom town of the Lunar mining regions. Mining and a thriving spacefreight trade in heavy metals made it a mecca for the toughest space-screws and hardest living prospector-miners to be found in the inhabited worlds. Saloons and cheap lodging-houses, gambling dens and neon-washed palaces of expensive sin, the jail and a flourishing assortment of glittery funeral parlors faced each other across two main intersecting streets. X marked the spot and life was the least costly of the many commodities offered for sale to rich-strike suckers who funneled in from all Luna.

The town occupied the cleared and leveled floor of a small ringwall "crater," and beneath its colorful dome of rainbowy perma-plastic, it sizzled. Dealers in mining equipment made overnight fortunes which they lost at the gaming tables just as quickly. In the streets one rubbed elbows with denizens from every part of the solar system; many of them curiously not anthropomorphic. Glittering and painted purveyors of more tawdry and shopworn goods than mining equipment also made fortunes overnight, and some of them paid for their greedy snatching at luxury with their empty lives. Brawls were sporadic and usually fatal.

Crystal City sizzled, and the Lunar Police sat on the lid as uneasily as if the place were a charge of high-explosive. It was, but it

made living conditions difficult for a policeman, and made the desk-sergeant's temper extremely short.

Tod Denver's experience with police stations had consisted chiefly of uncomfortable stays as an invited, reluctant guest. To a hard-drinking man, such invitations are both frequent and inescapable. So Tod Denver was uneasy in the presence of such an obviously ill-tempered desk sergeant. Memories are tender documents from past experience, and Denver's experiences had induced extreme sensitivity about jails. Especially Crystal City's jail.

Briefly, he acquainted irritable officialdom with details of his find in the Appenines. The sergeant was fat, belligerent and unphilosophical.

"You stink," said the sergeant, twisting his face into more repulsive suggestion of a distorted rubber mask.

Tod Denver tried to continue. The sergeant cut him off with a rude suggestion.

"So what?" added the official. "Suppose you did run into a murder. Do I care? Maybe you killed the old guy yourself and are trying to cover up. I don't know."

He scowled speculatively at Denver who waited and worried.

"Forget it," went on the sergeant. "We ain't got time to chase down everybody that knocks off a lone prospector. There's a lot of punks like you I'd like to bump myself right here in Crystal City. Even if you're telling the truth I don't believe you. If you'd thought he had something valuable you'd have swiped it yourself, not come running to us. Don't bother me. If you got something, snag it. If not, shove it—"

The suggestion was detailed, anatomical.

Charley giggled amiably. Startled, the sergeant looked up and caught sight of the monstrosity. He shrieked.

"What's that?"

"Charley, my moon dog," Denver explained. "They're quite scarce here."

Charley made eerie, chittering noises and settled on Denver's shoulder, waiting for his master to stroke the filaments of his blunt head.

"Looks like a cross between a bird and a carrot. Try making him scarce from my office."

"Don't worry, he's housebroke."

"Don't matter. Get him out of here, out

of Crystal City. We have an ordinance against pets. Unhealthy beasts. Disease-agents. They foul up the atmosphere."

"Not Charley," Denver argued hopelessly. "He's not animal; he's a natural air-purifier. Gives off ozone."

"Two hours you've got to get him out of here. Two hours. Out of town. I hope you go with him. If he don't stink, you do. If I have any trouble with either of you, you go in the tank."

Tod Denver gulped and held his nose. "Not your tank. No thanks. I want a hotel room with a tub and shower, not a night in your glue factory. Come on, Charley. I guess you sleep in the ship."

Charley grinned evilly at the sergeant. He gave out chuckling sounds, as if meditating. To escape disaster Tod Denver snatched him up and fled.

AFTER depositing Charley in the ship, he bought clean clothes and registered for a room at the Spaceport Hotel. After a bath, a shave and a civilized meal he felt more human than he had for many lonely months. He transferred his belongings to the new clothes, and opened his billfold to audit his dwindling resources. After the hotel and the new clothes and the storage-rent at the spaceport for his ship, there was barely enough for even a bust of limited dimensions. It would have to do.

As he replaced the money a battered photograph fell out. It was the picture of Laird Martin's child. A girl, not over four. She was plump and pretty in the vague way children are plump and pretty. An old picture, of course; faded and worn from frequent handling. Dirty and not too clear. How could anyone trace a small orphan girl on Earth with the picture and the incomplete address? She would be older, of course; maybe six or seven. Schools do keep records and lists of the pupils' names might be available if he had money to investigate. Which he hadn't.

His ship carried three months of supplies. Beside the money in his billfold, he had nothing else. Nothing but Charley, and the sales of him had always backfired. At best, a moon dog was not readily marketable. Besides, could he part with Charley?

Maybe if he looked into those old Martian workings, the money would be forth-

coming. After all, the dying Laird Martin had only asked that a share be reserved for his daughter. Put some aside for the kid. Use some to find her. Keep careful accounting and give her a fair half. More if she needed it and there wasn't too much. It was a nice thought, Denver felt warm and decent inside.

For the moment some of his thoughts verged upon indecencies.

He lacked the price but it cost nothing to look. He called it widow-shopping, which was not a misnomer in Crystal City. There were plenty of widows, some lonely, some lively. Some free and uninhibited. And he did have the price of the drinks.

The impulse carried him outside to a point near the X-like intersection of streets. Here, the possibilities of sin and evil splendor dazzled the eye.

Pressured atmosphere within the domed city was richer than Tod Denver was used to. Oxygen in pressure tanks costs money; and he had accustomed himself to do with as little as possible. Charley helped slightly. Now the stuff went tingling through nostrils, lungs and on to his veins. It swept upward to his brain and blood piled up there, feeling as if full of bursting tiny bubbles like champagne. He felt gay and feckless, light-headed and big-headed. Ego expanded, and he imagined himself a man of destiny at the turning point of his career.

He was not drunk, except on oxygen. Not drunk yet. But thirsty. The street was garish with display of drinkeries. In neon lights a tilted glass dripped beads of color. There was a name in luminous pastel-tubing:

Pot o' Stars.

Beneath the showering color stood a girl. Tod Denver's blood pressure soared nimbly upward and collided painfully with blocked safety valves. The look was worth it. Tremendous. Hot stuff.

Wow!

When bestially young he had dreamed lecherously of such a glorious creature. Older, bitter experience had taught him that they existed outside his price class. His eyes worked her over in frank admiration and his imagination worked overtime.

She was Martian, obviously, from her facial structure, if one noticed her face.

. Martian, of course. But certainly not one of the Red desert folk, nor one of the

spindly yellow-brown Canal-keepers. White. Probably sprang originally from the icy marshes near the Pole, where several odd remnants of the old white races still lived, and lingered painfully on the short rations of dying Mars.

She was pale and perilous and wonderful. Hair was shimmering bright cascade of spun platinum that fell in muted waves upon shoulders of naked beauty. Her eyes swam liquid silver with purple lights dwelling within, and her sullen red lips formed a heartshaped mouth, as if pouting. Heavy lids weighed down the eyes, and heavier barbaric bracelets weighted wrists and ankles. Twin breasts were mounds of soft, sun-dappled snow frosted with thin metal plates glowing with gemfire. Her simple garment was metalcloth, but so fine-spun and gauzelike that it seemed woven of moonlight. It seemed as un-needed as silver leafing draped upon some exotic flowering, but somehow enhanced the general effect.

Her effect was overpowering. Denver followed her inside and followed her sweet, poisonous witchery as the girl glided gracefully along the aisle between ranked tables. As she entered the glittering room talk died for a moment of sheer admiration, then began in swift whispered accents. Men dreamed inaudibly and the women envied and hated her on sight.

She seemed well-known to the place. Her name, Denver learned from the awed whispering, was—Darbor . . .

The Pot o' Stars combined drinking, dancing and gambling. A few people even ate food. There was muffled gaiety, glitter of glass and chromium, and general bad taste in the decoration. The hostesses were dressed merely to tempt and tease the homesick and love-lorn prospectors and lure the better-paid mine-workers into a deadly proximity to alcohol and gambling devices.

THE girl went ahead, and Denver followed, regretting his politeness when she beat him to the only unoccupied table. It had a big sign, *Reserved*, but she seemed waiting for no one, since she ordered a drink and merely played with it. She seemed wrapped in speculative contemplation of the other customers, as if estimating the possible profits to the house.

On impulse, Denver edged to her table and stood looking down at her. Cold eyes, like amber ice, looked through him.

"I know I look like a spacetramp," he observed. "But I'm not invisible. Mind if I pull up a cactus and squat?"

Her eyes were chill calculation.

"Suit yourself . . . if you like to live dangerously."

Denver laughed and sat down. "How important are you? Or is it something else? You don't look so deadly. I'll buy you a drink if you like. Or dance, if you're careless about toes."

Her cold shrug stopped him. "Skip it," she snapped. "Buy yourself a drink if you can afford it. Then go."

"What makes you rate a table to yourself? I could go now but I won't. The liquor here's probably poison but who pays for it makes no difference to me. Maybe you'd like to buy me a short snort. Or just snort at me again. On you, it looks good."

The girl gazed at him languorously, puzzled. Then she let go with a laugh which sparkled like audible champagne.

"Good for you," she said eagerly. "You're just a punk, but you have guts. Guts, but what else? Got any money?"

Denver bristled. "Pots of it," he lied, as any other man would. Then, remembering suddenly, "Not with me but I know where to lay hands on plenty of it."

Her eyes calculated. "You're not the goon who came in from the Appenines today? With a wild tale of murder and claim-jumpers and old Martian workings?"

Quick suspicion dulled Denver's appreciation of beauty.

She laughed sharply. "Don't worry about me, stupid. I heard it all over town. Policemen talk. For me, they jump through hoops. Everybody knows. You'd be smart to lie low before someone jumps out of a sung-bush and says boo! at you. If you expected the cops to do anything, you're naive. Or stupid. About those Martian workings, is there anything to the yarn?"

Denver grunted. He knew he was talking too much but the urge to brag is masculine and universal.

"Maybe, I don't know. Martian miners dabbled in heavy metals. Maybe they found something there and maybe they left some. If they did, I'm the guy with the treasure

map. Willing to take a chance on me?"

Darbor smiled calculatingly. "Look me up when you find the treasure. You're full of laughs tonight. Trying to pick me up on peanuts. Men lie down and beg me to walk on their faces. They lay gold or jewels or pots of uranium at my feet. Got any money—now?"

"I can pay . . . up to a point," Denver confessed miserably.

"We're not in business, kid. But champagne's on me. Don't worry about it. I own the joint up to a point. I don't, actually. Big Ed Caltis owns it. But I'm the dummy. I front for him because of taxes and the cops. We'll drink together tonight, and all for free. I haven't had a good laugh since they kicked me out of Venusport. You're it. I hope you aren't afraid of Big Ed. Everybody else is. He bosses the town, the cops and all the stinking politicians. He dabbles in every dirty racket, from girls to the gambling upstairs. He pays my bills, too, but so far he hasn't collected. Not that he hasn't tried."

Denver was impressed. Big Ed's girl. If she was. And he sat with her, alone, drinking at Big Ed's expense. That was a laugh. A hot one. Rich, even for Luna.

"Big Ed?" he said. "The Scorpion of Mars!"

Darbor's eyes narrowed. "The same. The name sounds like a gangsters' nickname. It isn't. He was a pro-wrestler. Champion of the Interplanetary League for three years. But he's a gangster and racketeer at heart. His bully-boys play rough. Still want to take a chance, sucker?"

A waitress brought drinks and departed. Snowgrape Champagne from Mars cooled in a silver bucket. It was the right temperature, so did not geyser as Denver unskillfully wrested out the cork. He filled the glasses, gave one to the girl. Raising the other, he smiled into Darbor's dangerous eyes.

"The first one to us," he offered gallantly. "After that, we'll drink to Big Ed. I hope he chokes. He was a louse in the ring."

Darbor's face lighted like a flaming sunset in the cloud-canopy of Venus.

"Here's to us then," she responded. "And to guts. You're dumb and delightful, but you do something to me I'd forgotten could be done. And maybe I'll change my mind

even if you don't have the price. I think I'll kiss you. Big Ed is still a louse, and not only in the ring. He thinks he can out-wrestle me but I know all the nasty holds. I play for keeps or not at all. Keep away from me, kid."

Denver's imagination had caught fire. Under the combined stimuli of Darbor and Snowgrape Champagne, he seemed to ascend to some high, rarified, alien dimension where life became serene and uncomplicated. A place where one ate and slept and made fortunes and love, and only the love was vital. He smoldered.

"Play me for keeps," he urged.

"Maybe I will," Darbor answered clearly. She was feeling the champagne too, but not as exaltedly as Denver who was not used to such potent vintages as Darbor and SG-Mars, 2028. "Maybe I will, kid, but ask me after the Martian workings work out."

"Don't think I won't," he promised eagerly. "Want to dance?"

Her face lighted up. She started to her feet, then sank back.

"Better not," she murmured. "Big Ed doesn't like other men to come near me. He's big, bad and jealous. He may be here tonight. Don't push your luck, kid. I'm trouble, bad trouble."

Denver snapped his fingers drunkenly. "That for Big Ed. I eat trouble."

Her eyes were twin pools of darkness. They widened as ripples of alarm spread through them. "Start eating," she said. "Here it comes!"

Big Ed Caltis stood behind Denver's chair.

III

TOD DENVER turned. "Hello, Rubber-face," he said pleasantly. "Sit down and have a drink. You're paying for it."

Big Ed Caltis turned apoplectic purple but he sat down. A waitress hustled up another glass. Silence in the room. Every eye focused upon the table where Big Ed Caltis sat and stared blindly at his uninvited guest.

Skilfully, Denver poured sparkling liquid against the inside curve of the third glass. With exaggerated care, he refilled his own and the girl's. He shoved the odd glass toward Big Ed with a careless gesture that

was not defiance but held a hint of something cold and deadly and menacing.

"Drink hearty, champ," he suggested. "You'll need strength and Dutch courage to hear some of the things I've wanted to tell you. I've been holding them for a long time. This is it."

Big Ed nodded slowly, ponderously. "I'm listening."

Denver began a long bill of particulars against Big Ed Caltis of Crystal City. He omitted little, though some of it was mere scandalous gossip with which solo-prospectors who had been the objects of a squeeze-play consoled themselves and took revenge upon their tormentor from safe distance. Denver paused once, briefly, to re-assess and recapture the delight he took in gazing at Darbor's beauty seated opposite. Then he resumed his account of the life and times of Big Ed, an improvised essay into the folly and stupidity of untamed greed which ended upon a sustained note of vituperation.

Big Ed smiled with sardonic amusement. He was in his late forties, running a bit to blubber, but still looked strong and capable. He waited until Tod Denver ran down, waited and smiled patiently.

"If you've finished," he said. "I should compliment you on the completeness of the picture you paint of me. When I need a biographer, I'll call on you. Just now I have another business proposition. I understand you know the location of some ancient Martian mine-workings. You need a partner. I'm proposing myself."

Denver paled. "I have partner," he said, nodding toward the girl.

Big Ed smiled thinly. "That's settled then. Her being your partner makes it easy. What she has is mine. I bought her. She works for me and everything she has is mine."

Darbor's eyes held curious despair. But hatred boiled up in her.

"Not altogether," she corrected him evenly. "You never got what you wanted most—me! And you never will. I just resigned. Get yourself another dummy."

But Ed stood up. "Very good. Maudlin but magnificent. Let me offer my congratulations to both of you. But you're mistaken. I'll get everything I want. I always do. I'm not through with either of you."

Darbor ignored him. "Dance?" she asked Denver. He rose and gallantly helped her from her chair.

Big Ed Caltis, after a black look, vanished toward the offices and gambling rooms upstairs. He paused once and glanced back.

Denver laughed suddenly. Darbor studied him and caught the echo of her own fear in his eyes. He mustered a hard core of courage in himself, but it required distinct effort.

"When I was a kid I liked to swing on fence-gates. Once, the hinges broke. I skinned my knee."

Her body was trembling. Some of it got into her voice. "It could happen again."

He met the challenge of her. She was bright steel, drawn to repel lurking enemies.

"I have another knee," he said, grinning. "But yours are too nice to bark up. Where's the back door?"

The music was Venusian, a swaying, sensuous thing of weirdest melodies and off-beat rhythms. Plucked and bowed strings blended with wailing flutes and an exotic tympany to produce music formed of passion and movement. Tod Denver and Darbor threaded their way through stiffly-paired swaying couples toward the invisible door at the rear.

"I hope you don't mind scar tissue on your toes," he murmured, bending his cheek in impulsive caress. He wished that he were nineteen again and could still dream. Twenty-seven seemed so aged and battered and cynical. And dreams can become nightmares.

They were near the door.

"Champagne tastes like vinegar if it's too cold," she replied. "My mouth is puckery and tastes like swill. I hope it's the blank champagne. Maybe I'm scared."

They dropped pretense and bolted for the door.

In the alley, they huddled among rubbish and garbage cans because the shadows lay thicker there.

THE danger was real and ugly and murderous. Three thugs came boiling through the alley door almost on their heels. They lay in the stinking refuse, not daring to breathe. Brawny, muscular men with faces that shone brutally in the blazing, reflected Earthlight scurried back and forth,

trying locked doors and making a hurried expedition to scout out the street. Passersby were buttonholed and roughly questioned. No one knew anything to tell.

One hatchetman came back to report.

Big Ed's voice could be heard in shrill tirade of fury.

"You fools. Don't let them get away. I'll wring the ears off the lot of you if they get to the spaceport. He was there; he was the one who spotted us. He can identify my ship. Now get out and find them. I'll pay a thousand vikdals Martian to the man who brings me either one. Kill the girl if you have to, but bring him back alive. I want his ears, and he knows where the stuff is. Now get out of here!"

More dark figures spurted from the dark doorway. Darbor gave involuntary shudder as they swept past in a flurry of heavy-beating footsteps. Denver held her tightly, hand over her mouth. She bit his hand and he repressed a squeal of pain. She made no outcry and the pounding footsteps faded into distance.

Big Ed Caltis went inside, loudly planning to call the watch-detail at the spaceport. His word was law in Crystal City.

"Can we beat them to the ship?" Denver asked.

"We can try," Darbor replied . . .

The spaceport was a blaze of light. Tod Denver expertly picked the gatelock. The watchman came out of his shack, picking his teeth. He looked sleepy, but grinned appreciatively at Darbor.

"Hi, Tod! You sure get around. Man just called about you. Sounded mad. What's up?"

"Plenty. What did you tell him?"

The watchman went on picking his teeth. "Nothing. He don't pay my wages. Want your ship? Last one in the line-up. Watch yourself. I haven't looked at it, but there've been funny noises tonight. Maybe you've got company."

"Maybe I have. Lend me your gun, Ike?"

"Sure. I've eaten. I'm going back to sleep. If you don't need the gun, leave it on the tool-locker. If you do, I want my name in the papers. They'll misspell it, but the old lady will get a kick. So long. Good luck. If it's a boy, Ike's a good, old-fashioned name."

Tod Denver and Darbor ran the length

of the illuminated hangar to the take-off pits at the far end. His space sled was the last in line. That would help for a quick blast-off.

Darbor was panting, ready to drop from exhaustion. But she dragged gamely on. Gun ready, he reached up to the airlock flap.

Inside the ship was sudden commotion. A scream was cut off sharply. Scurried movement became bedlam. Uproar ceased as if a knife had cut through a ribbon of sound.

Denver flung open the flap and scrambled up and through the valve to the interior.

Two of Big Ed's trigger men lay on the floor. One had just connected with a high-voltage charge from Charley. The other had quietly fainted. Denver dumped them outside, helped Darbor up and closed the ship for take-off. He switched off cabin lights.

He wasted no time in discussion until the ship was airborne and had nosed through the big dome-valves into the airless Lunar sky.

A fat hunk of Earth looked like a blueberry chiffon pie, but was brighter. It cast crazy shadows on the terrain unreeling below.

Darbor sat beside him. She felt dazed, and wondered briefly what had happened to her.

Less than an hour before she had entered the *Pot o' Stars* with nothing on her mind but assessing the clients and the possible receipts for the day. Too much had happened and too rapidly. She could not assimilate details.

Something launched itself through darkness at her. It snugged tightly to shoulder and neck and made chuckling sounds. Stiff fur nuzzled her skin. There was a vague prickling of hot needles, but it was disturbing rather than painful. She screamed.

"Shut up!" said Denver, laughing. "It's just Charley. But don't excite him or you'll regret it."

From the darkness came a confused burble of sounds as Charley explored and bestowed his affections upon a new friend still too startled to appreciate the gesture. Darbor tried vainly to fend off the lavish demonstrations.

Denver gunned the space sled viciously,

and felt the push of acceleration against his body. He headed for a distant mountain range.

"Just Charley, my pet moondog," he explained.

"What in Luna is that?"

"You'll find out. He loves everybody. Me, I'm more discriminating, but I can be had. My father warned me about women like you."

"How would he know?" Darbor asked bitterly. "What did he say about women like me?"

"It's exciting while it lasts, and it lasts as long as your money holds out. It's wonderful if you can afford it. But Charley's harmless. He's like me, he just wants to be loved. Go on. Pet him."

"All males are alike," Darbor grumbled. Obediently, she ran fingers over the soft, wirelike pseudo-fur. The fingers tingled as if weak charges of electricity surged through them.

"Does it—er, Charley ever blow a fuse?" she asked. "I'd like to have met your father. He sounds like a man who had a lot of experience with women. The wrong women. By the way, where are we going?"

TOD DENVER had debated the point with himself. "To the scene of the crime," he said. "It's not good, and they may look for us there. But we can hole up for a few days till the hunt dies down. It might be the last place Big Ed would expect to find us. Later, unless we find something in the Martian workings, we'll head for the far places. Okay?"

Darkness shrugged. "I suppose. But then what. I don't imagine you'll be a chivalrous jackass and want to marry me?"

The space sled drew a thin line of silver fire through darkness as he debated that point.

"Now that I'm sober, I'll think about it. Give me time. They say a man can get used to anything."

A ghostly choking sounded from the seat beside him. He wondered if Charley had blown something.

"Do they say what girls have to get used to?" she asked, her voice oddly tangled.

Tod Denver tempered the wind to the shorn lamb. "We'll see how the workings pan out. I'd want my money to last."

What Darbor replied should be written on asbestos.

THEIR idyl at the mines lasted exactly twenty-seven hours. Denver showed Darbor around, explained some of the technicalities of moon-mining to her. The girl misused some precious water to try washing the alley-filth from her clothes. Her experiment was not a success and the diaphanous wisps of moonsilver dissolved. She stood in the wrapped blanket and was too tired and depressed even to cry.

"I guess it wasn't practical," she decided ruefully. "It did bunch up in the weirdest places in your spare spacesuit. Have you any old rag I could borrow?"

Denver found cause for unsafe mirth in the spectacle of her blanketed disaster. "I'll see." He rooted about in a locker and found a worn pair of trousers which he threw to the girl. A sweater, too shrunken and misshapen for him to wear again, came next. Dismayed, she inspected the battered loot; then was inspired to quick alterations. Pant-legs cut off well above the baggy knees made passable shorts; the sweater bulged a trifle at the shoulders, it fit adequately elsewhere—and something more than adequately.

Charley fled her vicinity in extremes of voluble embarrassment as she changed and zipped up the substitute garments.

"Nice legs," Denver observed, which was an understatement.

"Watch out you don't skin those precious knees again," she warned darkly.

Time is completely arbitrary on the Moon as far as Earth people are concerned. One gets used to prolonged light and dark periods. Earth poked above the horizon, bathing the heights of the range with intense silver-blue light. But moonshadows lay heavily in the hollows and the deep gorges were still pools of intense gloom. Clocks are set to the meaningless twenty-four hour divisions of day and night on Earth, which have nothing to do with two-week days and nights on Luna. After sunset, with Earth-light still strong and pure and deceptively warm-looking, the landscapes become a barren, haunted wasteland.

Time itself seems unreal.

Time passed swiftly. The idyl was brief. For twenty-seven Earth-hours after their

landing at the mines came company . . . !

An approaching ship painted a quick-dying trail of fire upon the black vault of the sky. It swooped suddenly from nowhere, and the trapped fugitives debated flight or useless defense.

Alone, Denver would have stayed and fought, however uneven and hopeless the battle. But he found the girl a mental block to all thoughts of open, pitched battle on the shadowy, moonsilvered slopes. He might surprise the pursuers and flush them by some type of ambush. But they would be too many for him, and his feeble try would end either in death or capture.

Neither alternative appealed to him. With Darbor, he had suddenly found himself possessed of new tenacity toward life, and he had desperate, painful desire to live for her.

He chose flight.

IV

THE ship dropped short-lived rocket landing flares, circled and came in for a fast landing on the cleared strip of brittle-crusted ash.

Some distance from the hastily-patched and now hastily abandoned mine buildings, Tod Denver and Darbor paused and shot hasty, fearful glances toward the landed ship. By Earthlight, they could distinguish its lines, though not the color. It was a drab shadow now against the vivid grayness of slopes. Figures tiny from distance emerged from it and scattered across the flat and up into the clustered buildings. A few stragglers went over to explore and investigate Denver's space sled in the unlikely possibility that he and the girl had trusted to its meager and dubious protection.

Besides the ship, the hunters would find evidence of recent occupation in the living quarters, from which Denver had removed the frozen corpse before permitting Darbor to assist with the crude remodeling which he had undertaken. Afterward, when the mine buildings and exposed shafts had been turned out on futile quest for the fugitives, the search would spread. Tracks should be simple enough to follow, once located. Denver had anticipated this potential clue to the pursuit, and had kept their walking to the bare, rocky heights of the spur as long as possible.

He hoped to be able to locate the old Martian working, but the chance was slim. Calculating the shadow-apex of Mitre Peak at 2017 ET was complicated by several unknown quantities. Which peak was Mitre Peak? Was that shadow-apex Earth-shadow or Sun-shadow? And had he started out in the correct direction to find the line of deep-cut arrow markings at all?

The first intangible resolved itself. One mitre-shaped peak stood out alone and definite above the sharply defined silhouettes of the mountains. It must be Mitre Peak. It had to be.

The next question was the light source casting the shadow-apex. There were two possible answers. It was possible to estimate the approximate location of either sun or Earth at a given time, but calculations involved in working out too many possibilities on different Earth-days of the Lunar-day made the Earth's shadow-casting the likeliest prospect. Neither location was particularly exact, and probably Laird Martin had expected his directions to be gone into under less harrowing circumstances than those in which Denver now found himself. With time for trial and error one could eventually locate the place.

But Denver was hurried. He trod upon one of the markings while he still sought the elusive shadow apex.

After that, it was a grim race to follow the markings to the old mines, and to get under cover behind defensible barricades in time to repel invasion.

They played a nerve-wracking game of hare and hounds in tricky floods of Earthlight, upon slopes and spills of broken rock, amid a goblin's garden of towering jagged spires. It was tense work over the bad going, and the light was both distorted and insufficient. In shadow, they groped blindly from arrow to arrow. In the patches of Earthglare, they fled at awkward, desperate speed.

Life and death were the stakes. Life, or a fighting chance to defend life, possible wealth from the ancient workings, made a glittering goal ahead. And ever the gray hounds snapped at their heels, with death in some ugly guise the penalty for losing the game.

Charley was ecstatic. He gamboled and capered, he zoomed and zigzagged, he es-

sayed quick, climbing spirals and almost came to grief among the tangled pinnacles on the ridge of the hogback. He swooped downward again in a series of shallow, easy glides and began the performance all over again. It was a game for him, too. But a game in which he tried only to astound himself with swift, dizzy miracles of magnetic movement.

Charley enjoyed himself hugely. He was with the two people he liked most. He was having a spirited game among interlaced shadows and sudden, substantial obstacles of rock. He nuzzled the fleeing pair playfully, and followed them after his own lazy and intricate and incredibly whimsical fashion. His private mode of locomotion was not bounded by the possibilities involved in feet and tiring legs. He scampered and had fun.

It was not fun for Tod Denver and Darbor. The girl's strength was failing. She lagged, and Denver slowed his pace to support her tottering progress.

Without warning, the mine entrance loomed before them. It was old and crumbly with a thermal erosion resembling decay.

It was high and narrow and forbiddingly dark.

Tod Denver had brought portable radiolums, which were needed at once. Inside the portals was no light at all. Thick, tangible dark blocked the passage. It swallowed light.

Just inside, the mine gallery was too wide for easy defense. Further back, there was a narrowing.

DENVER seized on the possibilities for barricading and set to work, despite numbed and weary muscles. Walking on the Moon is tiring for muscles acquired on worlds of greater gravity. He was near exhaustion, but the stimulus of fear is strong. He worked like a maniac, hauling materials for blockade, carrying the smaller ingredients and rolling or dragging the heavier. A brief interval of rest brought Darbor to his side. She worked with him and helped with the heavier items. Fortunately, the faint gravity eased their task, speeded it.

For pursuit had not lagged. Their trail had been found and followed.

From behind his barricade, Denver

picked off the first two hired thugs of the advance guard as they toiled upward, too eagerly impatient for caution. A network of hastily-aimed beams of heat licked up from several angles of the slope, but none touched the barricade. The slope, which flattened just outside the entrance made exact shooting difficult, made a direct hit on the barricade almost impossible, unless one stood practically inside the carved entrance-way. Denver inched to the door and fired.

The battle was tedious, involved, but a stalemate. Lying on his belly, Denver wormed as close as he dared to the break of slope outside the door. There, he fired snap shots at everything that moved on the slopes. Everything that moved on the slopes made a point of returning the gesture. Some shots came from places he had seen no movement.

It went on for a long time. It was pointless, wanton waste of heat-blaster ammunition. But it satisfied some primal urge in the human male without solving anything.

Until Darbor joined him, Denver did not waste thought upon the futilities of the situation. Her presence terrified him, and he urged her back inside. She was stubborn, but complied when he dragged her back with him.

"Now stay inside, you fool," she muttered, her voice barely a whisper in his communication amplifier.

"You stay inside," he commanded with rough tenderness. They both stayed inside, crouched together behind the barricade.

"I think I got three of them," he told her. "There seemed to be eight at first. Some went back to the ship. For more men or supplies. I don't know. I don't like this."

"Relax," she suggested. "You've done all you can."

"I guess it's back to your gilded cage for you, baby," he said. "My money didn't last."

"Sometimes you behave like a mad dog," she observed. "I'm not sure I like you. You enjoyed that butchery out there. You hated to come inside. What did it prove? There are too many of them. They'll kill us, eventually. Or starve us out. Have you any bright ideas?"

Denver was silent. None of his ideas were very bright. He was at the end of his rope. He had tied a knot in it and hung on. But

the rope seemed very short and very insecure.

"Hang on, I guess. Just hang on and wait. They may try a rush. If they do I'll bathe the entrance in a full load from my blaster. If they don't rush, we sit it out. Sit and wait for a miracle. It won't happen but we can hope."

Darbor tried to hug the darkness around her. She was a Martian, tough-minded she hoped. It would be nasty, either way. But death was not pleasant. She must try to be strong and face whatever came. She shrugged and resigned herself.

"When the time comes I'll try to think of something touching and significant to say," she promised.

"You hold the fort," Denver told her. "And don't hesitate to shoot if you have to. There's a chance to wipe them out if they try to force in all at once. They won't, but—"

"Where are you going? For a walk?"

"Have to see a man about a dog. There may be a back entrance. I doubt it, since Martian workings on the Moon were never very deep. But I'd like a look at the jackpot. Do you mind?"

Darbor sigher. "Not if you hurry back."

Deep inside the long gallery was a huge, vaulted chamber. Here, Denver found what he sought. There was no back entrance. The mine was a trap that had closed on him and Darbor.

Old Martian workings, yes. But whatever the Martians had sought and delved from the mooncrust was gone. Layered veins had petered out, were exhausted, empty. Some glittering, crystalline smears remained in the crevices but the crystals were dull and lifeless. Denver bent close, sensed familiarity. The substance was not unknown. He wetted a finger and probed with it, rubbed again and tested for taste.

The taste was sharp and bitter. As bitter as his disappointment. It was all a grim joke. Valuable enough once to be used as money in the old days on earth. But hardly valuable enough, then, even in real quantity, to be worth the six lives it had cost up to now—counting his and Darbor's as already lost. First Laird Martin, with his last tragic thoughts of a tiny girl on Earth, now orphaned. Then the three men down the slope, hideous in their bulged and congeal-

ing death. Himself and Darbor next on the list, with not much time to go. All for a few crystals of—Salt!

THE end was as viciously ironic as the means had been brutal, but greed is an ugly force. It takes no heed of men and their brief, futile dreams.

Denver shrugged and rejoined his small garrison. The girl, in spite of the comradeship of shared danger, was as greedy as the others outside. Instinctively, Denver knew that, and he found the understanding in himself to pity her.

"Are they still out there?" he asked needlessly.

Darbor nodded. "What did you find?"

He debated telling her the truth. But why add the bitterness to the little left of her life? Let her dream. She would probably die without ever finding out that she had thrown herself away following a mirage. Let her dream and die happy.

"Enough," he answered roughly. "But does it matter?"

Her eyes rewarded his deceit, but the light was too poor for him to see them. It was easy enough to imagine stars in them, and even a man without illusions can still dream.

"Maybe it will matter," she replied. "We can hope for a miracle. It will make all the difference for us if the miracle happens."

Denver laughed. "Then the money will make a difference if we live through this? You mean you'll stay with me?"

Darbor answered too quickly. "Of course." Then she hesitated, as if something of his distaste echoed within her. She went on, her voice strange. "Sure, I'm mercenary. I've been broke in Venusport, and again here on Luna. It's no fun. Poverty is not all the noble things the copybooks say. It's undignified and degrading. You want to stop washing after a while, because it doesn't seem to matter. Yes, I want money. Am I different from other people?"

Denver laughed harshly. "No. I just thought for a few minutes that you were. I hoped I was at the head of your list. But let's not quarrel. We're friends in a jam together. No miracle is going to happen. It's stupid to fight over a salt mine, empty at that, when we're going to die. I'm like you; I wanted a miracle to happen but mine didn't concern money. We both got what we

asked for, that's all. If you bend over far enough somebody will kick you in the pants. I'm going out, Darbor. Pray for me."

The blankness of her face-plate turned toward him. A glitter, dark and opaque, was all he could make out.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know it was the wrong answer. But don't be a fool. He'll kill you, and I'm afraid to be in the dark, alone."

"I'll leave Charley with you."

Denver broke the girl's clasp on his arm and edged slow to the doorway. He shouted.

"Hey, Caltis!"

There was stunning silence. Then a far, muted crackle in his earphones.

A voice answered, "Yes? I'm here. What's on your mind, funny boy?"

"A parley."

"Nuts, but come on out. I'll talk."

"You come up," Denver argued. "I don't trust you."

Big Ed Caltis considered the proposition. "How do I know you won't try to nail me for hostage?"

"You don't. But I'm not a fool. What good would it do even if I killed you. Your men are down there. They'd still want the mine. I don't think they care enough about you to deal. They'd kill us anyhow. Bring your gun if it makes you feel more like a man."

After an interval Big Ed Caltis appeared in the doorway. As he entered Denver retreated into the shadow-zone until he stood close beside the rude barricade.

"I'll bargain with you, Caltis. You can have the workings. Let us go free, with an hour's start in my space sled. I'll sign over any share we could claim and agree never to bother you again. It's no use to a corpse. Just let us go."

Caltis gave a short laugh. In the earphones, it sounded nasty.

"No deal, Denver. I hate your guts. And I want Darbor. I've got both of you where I want you, sewed up. We can sit here and wait. We've plenty of air, food and water. You'll run short. I want you to come out, crawling. She can watch you die, slowly, because I'm not giving you any air, water or food. Then I want her to squirm a while before I kick her back into the sewers. You can't bargain. I have her, you, the workings, I've got what I want."

Hate and anger strangled Denver's reply. Caltis skulked back out of sight. Without moving, Denver hailed him again.

"Okay, puttyface!" Denver screamed. "You asked for it. I'm coming out. Stand clear and order off your thugs or I'll squeeze you till your guts squirt out your nose like toothpaste from a tube. I'll see how much man there is left in you. It'll be all over the slope when I'm through."

His taunt drew fire as he had hoped it would. He dodged quickly behind the shelter of the barricade. A beam of dazzling fire penciled the rock wall. It crackled, spread, flaring to incredible heat and light. It exploded, deluging the gallery with glare and spattering rock.

After the glare, darkness seemed thick enough to slice.

In that second of stunned reaction blindness, Denver was leaping the barricade and sprinting toward the entrance. Caltis came to meet him. Both fired at once. Both missed. The random beams flicked at the rough, timbered walls and lashed out with thunderous violence.

Locked together, the men pitched back and forth. They rocked and swayed, muscles straining. It was deadlock again. Denver was youth and fury. Caltis had experience and the training of a fighter. It was savage, lawless, the sculptured stance of embattled champions. Almost motionless, as forces canceled out. The battle was equal.

V

WHILE they tangled, both blocked, Darbor slipped past them and stood outside the entrance. She was exposed, a clear target. But the men below dared not fire until they knew where Caltis was, what had happened to him. She held the enemy at bay. Gun ready, Darbor faced down the slopes. It was not necessary to pull trigger. Not for the moment. She waited and hoped and dared someone to move.

Neither man gave first. It was the weakened timbering that supported the gallery roof. Loose stones rained down. Dry, cold and brittle wood sagged under strain. Both wild shots had taken shattering effect. Timbers yielded, slowly at first, then faster. Showering of loose stones became a steady stream. A minor avalanche.

Darbor heard the sound or caught some vibration through her helmet microphones. The men were too involved to notice. Caltis heard her. He got a cruel nosehold, twisted Denver's nose like an instrument dial. Denver screamed, released his grip. In the scramble, his foot slipped. Darbor cried out shrill warning.

Breaking free, Caltis bolted in panic toward the entrance.

The fall of rock was soundless. It spilled down in increasing torrents. Larger sections of ceiling were giving away.

Above the prostrate Denver hovered a poised phantom of eerie light. Charley, bored, had gone to sleep. Awakening, he found a game still going on. A fine new game. It was fascinating. He wanted to join the fun. Like an angle of reflected light cast by a turning mirror, he darted.

The running figure aroused his curiosity. Charley streamed through the collapsing gallery. He caught up with Caltis just inside the entrance. With a burble of insane, twittering glee, he went into action. It was all in the spirit of things. Just another delightful game.

Like a thunderbolt he hurtled upon Caltis, tangled with him. It was absurd, insane. Man and moondog went down together in a silly sprawl. Sparks flew, became a confused tesseract of luminous motion. Radiance blazed up and danced and flickered and no exact definition of the intertwined bodies was possible. Glowing lines wove fat webs of living color. It was too swift, too involved for any sane perception.

A wild, sprawling of legs, arms and body encircled and became part of the intricacies of speeding, impossible light.

It was a mess.

Some element or combination of forces in Charley, inspired by excitement and sheer delight, made unfortunate contact with ground currents of vagrant electricity. Electricity ceased to be invisible. It became sizzling, immense flash, in which many complexities made part of a simple whole. It was spectacular but brief. It was a flaming vortex of interlocked spirals of light and color and naked force. It was fireworks.

And it was the end of Big Ed Caltis. He fried, and hot grease spattered about him. He sizzled like a bug on a hot stove.

When Denver reached the entrance, man

and moondog lay in a curious huddle of interrupted action. It was over.

Charley was tired, but he still lived and functioned after his curious fashion. For the moment, he had lost interest in further fun and games. He lay quietly in a corner of rough rock and tried to rebuild his scattered and short-circuited energies. He pulsed and crackled and sound poured in floods of muffled static from the earphones in Denver's helmet.

But this was no time for social amenities. Big Ed Caltis was dead, very dead. But the others down the slope were still alive.

Like avenging angels, Denver and Darbor charged together down the slope. Besiegers scattered and fled in panic as twinned beams of dreadful light and heat scourged their hiding places. They fled through the grotesque shadow patterns of Lunar night. They fled back, some of them, to the black ship which had brought them. And there, they ran straight into the waiting arms of a detail from Space Patrol headquarters.

TOD DENVER'S friend, the watchman, had talked. From spaceport he had called the Space Patrol and talked where it would do some good. A bit late to be of much use, help had arrived. It took the Space Patrol squads a half hour to round up the scattered survivors.

Darbor went back to the mine-buildings with the Space Patrol lieutenant as escort. Denver trudged wearily back up the slope to recover Charley.

The moondog was in a bad way. He bulged badly amidships and seemed greatly disturbed, not to say temperamental. With tenderness and gentle care, Denver cradled the damaged Charley in his arms and made his way back to the living shack at the mine. Space Cops were just hustling in the last of the prisoners and making ready to return to civilization. Denver thanked them, but with brief curtness, for Charley's condition worried him. He went inside and tried to make his pet comfortable, wondering where one would look on the Moon for a veterinary competent to treat a moondog.

Darbor found him crouched over Charley's impoverished couch upon the metal table.

"I want to say goodbye," she told him.

"I'm sorry about Charley. The lieutenant says I can go back with them. So it's back to the bright lights for me."

"Good luck," Denver said shortly, tearing his attention from Charley's flickering gyrations. "I hope you find a man with a big fat bankbook."

"So do I," Darbor admitted. "I could use a new wardrobe. I wish it could have been you. If things had worked out—"

"Forget it," Denver snapped. "There'd have been Martin's kid. She'd have got half anyhow. You wouldn't have liked that."

Darbor essayed a grin. "You know, I've been thinking. Maybe the old guy was my father. It could be. I never knew who my old man was, and I did go to school on Earth. Reform school."

Denver regarded her cynically. "Couldn't be. I'm willing to believe you don't know who your father was. Some women should keep books. But that kid's not Martian."

Darbor shrugged. "Doesn't matter. So long, kid. If you make a big strike, look me up."

The Space Patrol lieutenant was waiting for her. She linked arms with him, and vanished toward the ship. Denver went back to Charley. Intently he studied the weird creature, wondering what to do.

A timid knock startled him. For a moment, wild hope dawned. Maybe Darbor—

But it wasn't Darbor. A strange girl stood in the doorway. She pushed open the inner flap of the airlock and stepped from the valve.

"I was looking around," she explained. "I bummed my way out with the Patrol Ship. Do you mind?"

Denver scowled at her. "Should I?"

The girl tried a smile on him but she looked ill-at-ease. "You look like one of the local boy scouts," she said. "How about helping a lady in distress?"

"I make a hobby of it," he snarled. "I don't even care if they're ladies. But I'm fresh out of romance and slightly soured. And I'm worried about the one friend who's dumb enough to stick by me. You picked a bad time to ask. What do you want?"

The girl smiled shyly. "All right, so you don't look like a boy scout. But I'm still a girl in a jam. I'm tired and broke and hungry. All I want is a sandwich, and

maybe a lift to the next town. I should have gone back with the Patrol ship but I guess they forgot me. I thought maybe, if you're going somewhere that's civilized, I could bum a lift. What's wrong with your friend?"

Denver indicated Charley. "Frankly, I don't know." He balked at trying to explain again just what a moondog was. "But who are you? What did you want here?"

The girl stared at him. "Didn't you know? I'm Soleil. My father owned this mine. He thought he'd found something, and sent for me to share it. It took the last of our money to get me here, but I wanted to come. We hadn't seen each other for twenty years. Now he's dead, and I'm broke, alone and scared. I need to get to some place where I can dream up an eating job."

"You're Martin's kid?"

Soleil nodded, absently, looking at Charley. The moondog gave a strange, electronic whimper. There was an odd expression on the girl's face. A flash of inspiration seemed to enlighten her.

"I'll take care of this," she said softly. "You wait outside."

Somewhat later, after blinding displays of erratic lightnings had released a splendor of fantastic color through the viewports to reflect staggeringly from the mountain walls, a tired girl called out to Tod Denver.

She met him inside the airlock. In her arms snuggled a pile of writhing radiance, like glowing worms. Moonpups. A whole litter of moonpups.

"They're cute," Soleil commented, "but I've never seen anything quite like this before."

"It must have been a delayed fuse," said Denver, wilting. "Here we go again."

He fainted. . . .

A WAKENING was painful to Denver. He remembered nightmare, and the latter part of his memory dealt with moonpups. Swarms of moonpups. As if Charley hadn't been enough. He was not sure that he wanted to open his eyes.

He thought he heard the outer flap of the airlock open, then someone pounding on the inner door. Habit of curiosity conquered, and his eyelids blinked. He looked up to find a strange man beside his bed. The man was fat, fussy, pompous. But he looked prosperous, and seemed excited.

Denver glanced warily about the room. After all, he had been strained. Perhaps it was all part of delirium. No sign of the girl either. Could he have imagined her, too? He sighed and remembered Darbor.

"Tod Denver?" asked the fat, prosperous man. "I got your name from a Sergeant of Security Police in Crystal City. He says you own a moon-dog. Is that true?"

Denver nodded painfully. "I'm afraid it is. What's the charge?"

The stranger seemed puzzled, amused. "This may seem odd to you, but I'm in the market for moon-dogs. Scientific laboratories all over the system want them, and are paying top prices. The most unusual and interesting life form in existence. But moon-dogs are scarce. Would you consider parting with yours? I can assure you he'll receive kind treatment and good care. They're too valuable for anything else."

Denver almost blanked out again. It was too much like the more harrowing part of his dreams. He blinked his eyes, but the man was still there.

"One of us is crazy," he mused aloud. "Maybe both of us. I can't sell Charley. I'd miss him too much."

Suddenly, as it happens in dreams, Soleil Martin stood beside him. Her arms were empty, but she stood there, smiling.

"You wouldn't have to sell Charley," she said, giving Denver a curious, trusting glance. "Had you forgotten that you're now a father, or foster-grandfather, or something. You have moonpups, in quantity. I had to let you lie there while I put the little darlings to bed. And it's not Charley any more, please. Charlotte. It has to be Charlotte."

Denver paled and groaned. He turned hopefully to the fat stranger.

"Say, mister, how many moonpups can you use?"

"All of them, if you'll sell." The man whipped out a signed, blank check, and quickly filled in astronomical figures. Denver looked at it, whistled, then doubted first his sanity, then the check.

"Take them," Denver murmured. "Take them, quick, before you change your mind, or all this evaporates in dream."

A moon-dog has no nerves. Charley—or Charlotte—had none, but the brood of moonpups had already begun to get on

whatever passed for nerves in his electronic make-up. He was glad and relieved to be rid of his numerous progeny. He, or she, showed passionate and embarrassing affection for Denver, and even generously included Soleil Martin in the display.

Denver stared at her suddenly while she helped the commission agent round up his radiant loot and make ready for the return to town. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time. She was pretty. Not beautiful, of course. Just pretty. And nice. He remembered that he was carrying her picture in his pocket.

She was even an Earth-girl. They were almost as scarce in the moon colonies as moon-dogs.

"Look here," he said. "I have money now. I was going out prospecting but it can wait. I kind of inherited you from your father, you know. Do you need dough or something?"

Soleil laughed. "I need everything. But don't bother. I haven't any claim on you. And I can ride back to the city with Mr. Potts. He looks like a better bet. He can write such big checks, too."

Denver made a face of disgust. "All women are alike," he muttered savagely. "Go on, then—"

Soleil frowned. "Don't say it. Don't even think it. I'm not going anywhere. Not till you go. I just wanted you to ask me nice. I'm staying. I'll go prospecting with you. I like that. Dad made me study minerals and mining. I can be a real help. With that big check, we can get a real outfit."

Denver stopped dreaming. "But you don't know what it's like out there. Just empty miles of loneliness and heat and desert and mountains of bare rock. Not even the minimum comforts. Nights last two Earth weeks. There'd just be you and me and Charlotte."

Soleil smiled fondly. "It listens good, and might be fun. I like Charlotte and you. I'm realistic and strong enough to be a genuine partner."

Tod Denver gasped. "You sure know what you want—Partner!" He grinned. "Now we'll have a married woman along. I was worried about wandering around, unprotected, with a female moon-dog—"

Soleil laughed. "I think Charlotte needs a chaperone."

(Continued from page 3)

Concerning the stories where a drunk meets the devil, sells his soul for a bowl of mead, and dies in the hope of a glorious resurrection. Where a drunk meets a mythological creature who sells him a jug of apple-jack for his red nose.

And where a drunk meets some extra-terrestrial characters who dash their ship into the sun for fear of catching the dread disease, Alcoholus Anonimus.

I'm sick of stories where the main character turns out to be a Martian, his murderer a Venusian, and the detective a Siiran. Scene of action, Earth: 1953.

I dislike most of all, editors who print letters daring them to be printed, letters denouncing the editor as a so-and-so, letters that address the editor as a mud-turtle, psychotic, extra-terrestrial, cave-dweller, etc. The above all being cleverly worded so as to start with the same initials to the editor.

Wake up editor, edit!

Yours sincerely,

MARTIN GROSS

Ed's note: Doin' just that, son. Caught thirteen fumbles in this missive. By the way, what do you like?

3 ARGUMENTS

1517 Lincoln Ave.
Calumet City, Ill.

Dear Ed,

The extremely interesting discussions that are being carried on in your column now, have flushed me from my former silence. To save space I will give the ratings now. Send all three pics to Bruce Hapke since there were no others worthy of this merit.

First argument: Ever since I have been able to think for myself, I have heard curses thrown toward members of races other than the white race. I have never known whether to pity these individuals, or hate them. I would pity them because of their inability to think for themselves; because they let some domineering person in their lives dictate to them beliefs which are vicious in every sense of the word.

Second argument: Milton's works were only classic for the religion that is contained within him. In the time of their publication religion was the vogue, and everyone talked the various saints and the like to a long grave. But for the sole reason that Milton's works were called "classic" in that era, everyone has continued to call it as such, since modern literature today is, and will continue to be, backward. Thus the lack of poetical encouragement.

Before trying to read PARADISE LOST I read BEOWULF and EVERYMAN to try to get the evolution from saga to drama. From this I went into the works of the Carolinian Poets, Suckling, Donne, and Herbert. How different from the high-flown pomposity of Milton's. But one must realize that Milton was brought up in the strictest of homes, where a difference of opinion would have brought excommunication. Well, this is getting out of hand, so I'll wind it up by saying that classic is often mistaken for legendary.

Third argument (my own): Greg Calkins brought up a subject that is very tender to me. It is my opinion that the basic intelligence of the average American has sunk to an all-time low. The recent flood of sex pocketbooks and books upon the market is not without foundation. It seems that the average career girl is not in style unless she is seen with a copy of this legitimate filth. Some poor fools actually call this tripe literature; under some opium dream, I suppose.

In various issues PS has tried to pass this off as entertainment. If it becomes regular, it would not be hard to cancel my subscription. I know them's fightin'

words, but I really get vociferous upon this subject. Excellent authors, Edison Marshall among them, have turned to this market for easy money. I wonder if money is so important that one must cast off his scruples for it.

I hold that only a vast literary shock can tear the public from its reading now. It is my hope that stf in its best forms will compose the vanguard of this shock, for it is a known fact that this country needs a renaissance in its arts. Even the world of art is in a dark age of surrealism and modernism. I believe their is a doorway yet. A doorway to a golden era of art and literature, that will tear us away from our morose dwelling upon war and death.

PLANET STORIES started me out upon undiluted stf. Though the quality may vary from issue to issue, the excellent policy has continued in giving us the same type of story that was made popular by Burroughs, Cummings, and Williamson.

I was happy to note that there has been a maturing of the art department. I would like to see Earl Mayan used again. In case you are interested, Ed Emsler's pic on Anderson's epic epoch was the best. Now all you have to do is to tear the restraining cover policy from Anderson and you will be tops in the cover department.

Along with the criticisms this letter offers, I want to express my heartfelt thanks for many nights of entertainment.

Yours in friendliness,

PHILIP BRANTINGHAM

ONE FOR THE COVER

930 Briarcliff Avenue
Salt Lake City 16, Utah

Dear Jack,

Re the March Planet. Anderson on the cover with a terrific job, as he usually does, but slightly above average this time. If only he'd illustrate a story on the cover. However, the artwork, both inside and outside, showed signs of better talent than has graced PLANET in the past few issues. In fact, almost all the illo's were very good, especially the one for TONIGHT THE STARS REVOLT!—a very good title by the way.

Also, a very good story. The only drawback it had was the curse of shortness. Otherwise very acceptable. In fact, all of them seemed to be, this time. Poul Anderson raised himself just a little out of the back class this time for an entertaining novellet instead of his regular thud-and-blunder stf. Crossen managed, too, and gave us an end-of-civilization story with an entirely new twist to the migration of man. Even the shortest of short stories reared up on their hind legs and were readable—nay, even enjoyable.

Sincerely,

GREGG CALKINS

PATIENCE!

Rt. 3, Box 68A
Kannapolis, N. C.

Dear Editor:

It has been a long time since I have written a letter to PLANET. What decided me was the continued procession of poor covers. Not so long ago our mag took a back seat to no one. Now, although the stories are better than average, the covers are undoubtedly the worst appearing on any magazine. Give us back the old masthead with Gross, Saunders or Leydenfrost on the covers. Vestal and Valigursky are very good on interiors.

I would sure like to see you get Paul back. He is still doing some swell work in the faw illustrations

I have seen lately. He was the best PLANET ever had or will have. His Interplanetary scenes and alien beings are still something to see. With this combination PLANET could get to the level of covers it had when Anderson took over. This fellow has had a couple of years to improve and he hasn't done so. Lets get rid of these loud and crude covers with colors smeared all over.

Now for my rating of the stories in the March issue. They are rated in order of preference.

1. TONIGHT THE STARS REVOLT—Fox easily takes first place. He has been away too long. More.
2. RETURN OF A LEGEND—Gallun makes you believe his story is possible.
3. THE AMBASSADORS FROM VENUS—Crossen had a good idea. Very well handled.
4. CAPTIVE OF THE CENTAURIANS—Anderson usually gets first place with me, but his story just didn't come up to par. Good anyway.
5. IS THAT YOU XELUCHI?—Hetschel's short story is better than average.
6. RICOCHET ON MIZA—Dickson's story was fair.

All in all a pretty good issue, except for the cover. Please do something about it.

In closing I would like to say I enjoy Two Complete Science—Adventure Books very much. In fact I prefer it, mostly because I am partial to long novels.

Sincerely,

NED REECE

Ed's note: Cheer up, chum, there's a Vestal cover on the way. Sept. ish, perhaps.

MANY THANKS—THANKS

P. O. Box 2460
Reno, Nevada

Dear Ed:

If I am permitted to elongate the Nolan-Corby-Stone-Gibson-Hapke chain appearing in the last several issues, letters originally concerning the questioned merit of Mr. Bradbury's enriching contributions to our favorite field of literature, I'll offer my thanks (but in different ways) to Mr. Joe Gibson (Jan. Vizi) and Mr. Bruce Hapke (March). Mr. Gibson I'll thank to read my letter again, if he can stand it, and I'll eat every copy of PS he can find (they're not bad, you know) showing I state or imply in my letter that I'm not speaking for myself.

Incidentally, I am thankful that the last four hundred years have sufficiently mellowed one's harsh basic nature so I needn't fear for my life from the "We" for whom he is speaking. And, of course, I'll have to look up Wells' OUTLINE OF HISTORY sometime, since Mr. Gibson recommends it. I want to be civilized, too.

Mr. Bruce Hapke I thank in an altogether different way; I thank him for reading my letter and taking the trouble to comment on it, and I am delighted that he agrees with me on the essential issue, and here there is no sarcasm intended. After his letter, however, I feel myself in the role of defending a position which I did not intend to hold, namely, "... Stone's implication that human nature cannot ... (be changed)."

I specifically said, "I don't say it can't change; I believe it will, probably ..." Yet, in that single semester course in psychology that Mr. Hapke recommends, the lecturer stated that our average I. Q. has very probably not gone up a single notch in the last ever-so-many years. That I and anyone else are not the same people we were a given time ago, is indis-

putable, but you would not say that the nature of trees changes because trees grow.

As a matter of fact, if it should change, they would no longer be trees, exactly. (Notice the Bradbury flavor of that last bit.) But trees they still are, and there you have it. One does not react to many situations now in the same way he would have when he was, say, ten years old. But, to be considered normal, his reaction must be within the bounds of human nature. I doubt whether the average man born five thousand years ago, were he transplanted to our culture shortly after his birth, would, on maturity, react much differently from the average man of today.

Our changed manner of treating conquered enemies—not so very changed, at that, sometimes, Bruce—can be attributed to swifter means of communication of ideas, of people, pictures, news, retaliation, and death. It is more practical and sensible to be decent to the man on whom, or on whose family, our lives may depend, even indirectly. Intelligence is, in a sense, the ability to "catch on" quickly. The human race is catching on but it is not getting more intelligent; it is not, in that sense, changing its nature.

F. W. Van Wyck Mason notwithstanding, humans still savagely oppress those they can be sure are firmly under heel, there are still gross tastes and customs (what would it prove if there weren't?), and there is still an insensate intolerance among religious factions and among races, even now, later, when the line of racial distinction is more difficult to determine. I disagree with his statement that "... people as a whole have changed immeasurably during the interval between 1649 and 1949 ..." as pertains to human nature. We have become very slightly less ignorant. In considering human nature, it doesn't matter a great deal whether a man wears a toga or a cravat, a scimitar or a Colt, or a Faraday molecular disruptor.

Overstreet, too, notwithstanding, many religions, claiming a great many adherents, still believe in hell. It's a bit more than a figure of speech with the average man. Does it matter whether a soul be condemned to an infinite intensity and duration of pain, in vengeance awful and powerful, or by a serene and merciful Wisdom? The pain is the same. So is the concept; the idea is to make it more palatable. But this is too controversial a subject.

When the car is stuck, does spinning the wheels indicate progress? Not necessarily. Perhaps we have been a stuck car all along; perhaps not. If we are going to reach maturity, I'll grant that we're getting closer, at least temporarily. Let's hope. But better to put faith in progressive learning than in progressive changes of human nature. For myself, I can't see any past changes; there seems to be no precedent.

Now then, Dear Editor, to pass from the controversial into the sublime: I like your magazine. I like it because, among other things, it doesn't pretend to be what it's not. When the stories are good, they're good. When they're corny, which they sometimes are, why, it's pretty good corn, as corn goes. And you usually have a copious letter department; that in itself is worth more than the price of the magazine. As to articles, which somebody requests, I'd like to unrequest them, thank you. If I want science, I can buy a science mag, but what could I do to get science-fiction?

Quite sincerely yours,

ARTHUR STONE

ESCALATOR, UPI

2630 Penn Ave. No.
Minneapolis, Minn.

Dear Jack:

PLANET is finally pulling out of a rut. The Janu-

ary issue, while not quite magnificent, was good science-adventure, led by SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS and CALLING WORLD-4 OF KITH-GOL.

The March issue continued the recent improvement, as follows:

Cover: Darn good! In fact, I like Anderson! (Is that a fennish rumble of discontent I hear?) The light background coloring and tight black costume showed off the . . . um, good qualities of the girl to good advantage. I was intrigued by the color of the Amazon's lipstick. Apparently Andy has acquired a touch of McCauley in the last couple months. The less said about the blue men, however, the better.

Art: Ranged from inadequate to hideous. A couple really good artists (Cartier or Schomburg, for example) could give this sagging department a much-needed shot in the arm.

Stories, in order of merit:

1. THE AMBASSADORS FROM VENUS. Ken Crossen's best sf yarn so far. Why not revive MEET THE AUTHOR with a feature on him?

2. IS THAT YOU XXXXXX?

3. RICOCHET ON MIZA. Guessed the ending but it was well-written.

4. TONIGHT THE STARS REVOLT! Writing was a bit confusing in some places, but it held my interest.

5. RETURN OF A LEGEND. Would have ranked higher with better writing.

6. CAPTIVE OF THE CENTAURIANESS. Anderson wrote *this* hack??? He's usually one of my favorite authors, but I gave up after reading the first three chapters of this silly mess. Maybe you've been overworking him. Rest him for an issue or two and then let him redeem himself with a LONG novel, preferably about Dom Flandry.

VIZIGRAPH: For some reason La Viz was best in a long time. First place to Bruce Hapke's interesting letter, which I agree with completely. Second to Wilde William Tuning for proving that there is something in a name, after all. God save the King. Third to Reggie Murphy (ugh!).

I now store P.S. V5N5, March, '52, into my files, washing my hands before and after.

JAMES LYNCH

Ed's note: Wash before, at any rate. Someone else may want your ish.

REGUSTED

4231 Stanton St.,
San Luciano, Calif.

Dear Jack:

I perused your latest issue with considerable disgust, especially that atrocious mess called a letter column, and that blob on the cover. Your issues are usually terrible, and I buy your magazine only when I've bought and read all the others, but your March issue just plain stinks. I can't understand how anyone alive could perpetrate such a horror on an unsuspecting public and not die from his own stupidity and meanness.

Only a moron would tolerate such a ghastly slop of a letter column: that thing is the worst eyesore I have ever had the misfortune to gaze upon. Don't you exercise any choice in your publication of letters? By the contents of your slop column I would say not. It's nothing more than a squirrel cage with ill-tempered inmates continually engaged in biding one another. They write in for no better reason than to see their names in print. If they knew what decent people

thought of them they would or should hide their typewriters in shame.

And look at that nauseating blob on your cover. I'll bet Anderson paints that by dabbling his toes in the luriddest colors he can find and walking over a piece of drawing paper. Probably never drew anything except women since he was born. He doesn't draw them so very well either. My observation of the cover, due to your color-blind artist, has to be made through a dark-tinted glass in order for me to even catch a glimpse of what it was all about.

Your shorts and the novelet weren't too bad, but those things you assert as being novels—who let those two stench in the door? If I want to read about the past of man, I want to do it by reading about his *past*, not some doctored-up version of same. When I pick up a science-fiction magazine I expect to read about Earth's future, not her miserable past.

Yours in disgust,

KEN MORGAN

Ed's note: 'Tis often said, the last shall be first.

SIX IN ONE

216 Breen-Phillips Hall
U. of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana

Editor:

Relax, Sir. I am not going to say a word about your-ah-magazine.

To Mr. Edwin Sigler:

My Dear Mr. Sigler, I find your sarcasm crude and ill-planned. You, Sir, and not Messers Wigodski and Burell, are the one whose insults were childish and puerile. I do not think an argument should be carried out in any manner other than a logical discussion in which all points could be proved to avoid dispute. I do not, therefore, condone the efforts of Messers Wigodski and Burell; but I do censure you. They did not attempt sarcasm; you did.

To Mr. William Tuning:

Read Chauver.

To D. J. Lanoue:

You cry for intelligent letters. Write one.

To the Writer of the First Letter:

You, Sir, need a Psychologist. You are obviously unbalanced.

To Bruce Hapke:

Plaudits, Sir. Keep it up.

To the Editor:

Give Mr. Hapke the illustration.

JOHN P. HEAD

HARD SEAT

220 Shoreward Dr.,
Great Neck, N. Y.

Dear J. O.:

Now that the editorial chair has been molded to suit your own ends, and since every P.S. editor gets to read one of my classics at least once during his tenure, I thought maybe it might be nice if we had a short talk, you and I.

What is a "televistic" short story, O'Sullivan? This ain't Channel 4, y'know. And what did Hasse do in this issue—lay out the Rupture-Easer ad? Gotta watch that stuff, lad. Or was that a variation of the hidden-ball trick?

While we're on the subject of football magazines—it's cruel, I know—please, please remember that there are a few indications that any old formula story just won't do, even in science-adventure. We don't like getting the same basic story twice in one issue. No kick on the novelette or the shorts, mind you, as far as originality goes, but the novels!

Whadda we got in the novels, chum? Hero-Heroine-stooge-villain. Hero, heroine, and stooge battle to overcome overwhelming odds. Hero, heroine, and stooge, get nowhere until they discover The Great Invention. Hero, heroine, and stooge use Great Invention to overcome villain in something over half a column. Sweetness and light descend all over.

Okay, so CAPTIVE OF THE CENTAURIANNESS alternated characters in the hero-heroine-stooge department until the whole thing resembled a screen pass play with empty ump eligible receivers. And it was funny, or is the word ludicrous? Still formula, lad. And as for TONIGHT THE STARS REVOLT!, maybe that one *should* have been funny. Or was it actually a subtle satire?

In short, J. O. old robot, things ain't the same as they was when Twinkdetoes Shurshot kicked the winning field goal in the closing seconds of the game. Let's face it, this issue of P.S. didn't go so good. Otherwise, everything's fine.

Two things to make up for the chilly reception:

1. The first guy calls you a heel, (All in the spirit of good clean subtle humor, with an arpeggio of lady-like titters.) has me to deal with, too. Undoubtedly someone has already seized this opportunity to display his dry wit. To you, sir or madam, as the case may be, my thanks for displaying once more the fact that the young fen are still with us.

2. I can see nothing wrong with the hypothesis that a spacecraft equipped with the type of drive described in C. OF THE C. could have a wooden bull.

End of Moral Support.

As if I hadn't said it already, isn't there an overly large majority of slightly silly letters in the Vizi this season? Not that mine are any great shakes, but 'tis true, isn't it, that most of the attempted humor is slightly pointless? Used to write 'em myself, God knows (Whaddazze mean, "used to"?), but the editors scissored, the crud out. *You're* not even correcting the spelling, and that, friend, in a fen letter, can be deadly.

A word to Bruce Hapke. So human nature is changing? Maybe some of the old savagery is merely appearing in new forms. And, there are plenty of religious sects where God is still a pretty terrifying entity, Overstreet to the contrary. And, though I know it's getting to be a boring subject, no nation, no culture, no peoples, ever, and I mean ever, had anything like the system in power in the U. S. S. R. today. Nowhere before has such incredible, unbelievable savagery, such complete amorality, been practised on so colossal a scale. And the U. S. S. R., Bruce, comprises a healthy percentage, both in population and area, of the world today, the world which you are so confident is a better one. I wish I were as sure of that as you are.

Corporal Callaghan's query about articles doesn't draw my support. You print 'em, I'll read 'em, but I'd rather read fiction. What would your subjects be? Technical? Who'd understand them? Popularizations

of scientific facts? It's being done by competitors. "Scientific oddities?" Who cares? DeCamp-type debunking jobs? Interesting, but not overwhelmingly so. Also, it is a science-adventure mag, isn't it? Hell, man, I'm no amateur scientist. Are you?

Mr. Sigler: You are probably kind to dogs. I have read your stories, such as they were, and I suggest you confine your comments on those written by professional authors to concrete terms of a technical nature, thus allowing the readers a chance to observe your own manifest unfamiliarity with them. Should you care to defend the aforementioned minor and inconsequential, not to say unoriginal, products of your obviously high-type mind, and should you do so with even a small degree of success, I will concede that you have a right to label another writer's product as tripe, and will cease to bother you. Meanwhile, shall we play games, Mr. Sigler? Use your best long words, chum.

And that's about all, except for some short comments.

I do not admire Napoli illustrations.

While Ed Emsler does all right, I'd rather see Vestal illustrating a majority of stories.

Could we have a Gross cover for a change? Just one, to sort of break up monotony.

Why is there suddenly no letter column in Two S-A Books?

Letter ratings as follows: Hapke, for an intelligent letter; Kohls, for a thoughtful one; and Callaghan, for a constructive idea. In that order. Since Sigler has his friends in stitches, could he award him the original mat for the Rupture-Easer ad?

Ah, well, 'twas but a fleeting thought.

Luck, J. O.,

A. J. BUDRYS

Ed's note: One rupture easer for the Ed, please.

STORIES, NOT PAPER

Box 14
Bedford, Ohio

Dear Ed:

I am undoubtedly what your other fans would call a dope with absolutely no idea of art. They most likely are right.

I read sci-fiction because I like it. Also, because I believe in it. By this I do not mean all the weird people and monstrosities that authors necessarily dream up to make their stories interesting, but the basic science that crops up more and more in the stories.

I will agree that some stories aren't as good as others but there are very few that I would say phewwww to.

I never could understand why your fans keep griping about slick pages and trimmed edges. Until I read about it in the VIZIGRAPH I really never noticed.

I buy the magazine to read the stories and they read just as well to me on pulp, or whatever you call it, as anything else. I won't pretend I'm enough of a critic to rate stories. I'll just say I liked TONIGHT THE STARS REVOLT! best in the March issue.

The one and only complaint I have is the fact that I can read the whole magazine in one day. Then I have to wait and wait for the next one.

Sincerely,

JIMMIE JOHNSON



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sizes for perfect fit)

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1 pr. Maroon
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Length



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Length

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Every purchase is covered by the iron-clad Guarantee of the Joy Hosiery Mills. A printed Guarantee Certificate comes with your socks, given without any cost, only what it costs you to wear conditionally GUARANTEED ONE FULL YEAR OF SATISFACTORY WEAR from each and every pair of socks or you get NEW SOCKS FREE to replace those that wear out.

The Guarantee Certificate effect the day you continue to wear a full year. It prevents any possibility of misunderstanding, question or quibble. It is your absolute assurance of service and value.

JOY HOSIERY MILLS, Dept. S-141, Clifton, New Jersey

Please send me 5 pairs Guaranteed socks for examination. I will pay the postman only \$2.98 plus postal charges on delivery, with the understanding that you will refund my money in full if I return the socks in 5 days. If I keep them, you guarantee to replace FREE any pair in which I wear holes within ONE YEAR.

☐ Check here if you prefer to enclose \$2.98 and we will pay postal charge. Same return privilege, same Free Replacement Guarantee.

Size..... Color: ☐ Assorted, ☐ Black, ☐ White,
☐ Regular ☐ Ankle

Name

Address

City..... Zone..... State.....

JOY HOSIERY MILLS, Dept. S-141, Clifton, New Jersey